



NECROMUNDA™

# JUNKTION

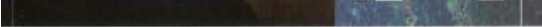
MATTHEW FARRER



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In order to even begin to understand the blasted world of Necromunda you must first understand the hive cities. These man-made mountains of plasteel, ceramite and rockcrete have accreted over centuries to protect their inhabitants from a hostile environment, so very much like the termite mounds they resemble. The Necromundan hive cities have populations in the billions and are intensely industrialised, each one commanding the manufacturing potential of an entire planet or colony system compacted into a few hundred square kilometres.

The internal stratification of the hive cities is also illuminating to observe. The entire hive structure replicates the social status of its inhabitants in a vertical plane. At the top are the nobility, below them are the workers, and below the workers are the dregs of society, the outcasts. Hive Primus, seat of the planetary governor Lord Helmawr of Necromunda, illustrates this in the starkest terms. The nobles -Houses Helmawr, Cattalus, Ty, Ulant, Greim, Ran Lo and Ko'Iron -live in the 'Spire', and seldom set foot below the 'Wall' that exists between themselves and the great forges and hab zones of the hive city proper.

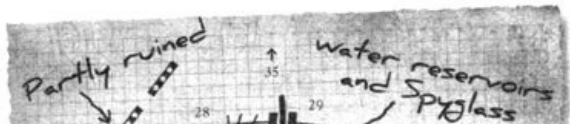
Below the hive city is the 'Underhive', foundation layers of habitation domes, industrial zones and tunnels which have been abandoned in prior generations, only to be re-occupied

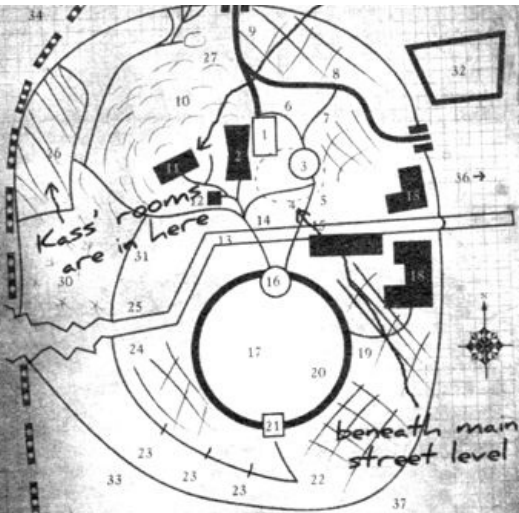
by those with nowhere else to go.

But... humans are not insects. They do not hive together well. Necessity may force it. but the hive cities of Necromunda remain internally divided to the point of brutalisation and outright violence being an everyday fact of life. The Underhive, meanwhile, is a thoroughly lawless place, beset by gangs and renegades, where only the strongest or the most cunning survive. The Goliaths, who believe firmly that might is right; the matriarchal, man-hating Escher; the industrial Orlocks; the technologically-minded Van Saar; the Delaquer whose very existence depends on their espionage network; the firey zealots of the Cawdor. All striving for the advantage that will elevate them, no matter how briefly, above the other houses and gangs of the Underhive.

Most fascinating of all is when individuals attempt to cross the monumental physical and social divides of the hive to start new lives. Given social conditions, ascension through the hive is nigh on impossible, but descent is an altogether easier, albeit altogether less appealing, possibility.

*excerpted from Xonariarius the Younger's Nobilitate Pax  
Imperator -  
the Triumph of Aristocracy over Democracy.*





1. Grampair	15. Helmner's Bridge	30. Lichen forests
2. Quacktown	16. Guilders' Hill	31. Barkers' Way
3. The Bunkerhouse	17. The Red Pile	32. The Siftpost
4. House of Long-Gone Circle	18. Peigut (farm)	33. Rubble chimes
5. The Switching Hole	19. Junktion Road	34. Deane wall
6. The Brokerheads' Alley	20. Sumpback Road	35. To Chamberpat, Marrow Eitten, Ghoul Bend
7. Anwin's Alley	21. Cyclops Square	36. To Shining Falls
8. The Quackstone Road	22. Highstone	37. To Tarvo
9. Highstone Road	23. The Sixward Stotgates	
10. The Black Pile	24. Ninesward Sump	
11. Town fathers' compound	25. Wylking stoness/causeway	
12. Toward Father Willerra's compound	26. Bell-Commons half-stacks	
13. Toward Father Willerra's compound	27. The Brass Pit	
14. Toward Father Willerra's compound	28. The Gridholes	
15. Toward Father Willerra's compound	29. The twelve-ward gate	

**SETTLEMENT**

173/AB23

10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31 32 33 34 35 36 37 38



# PROLOGUE

For me it all begins with one single, knife-sharp memory that hasn't ever begun to fade.

It was in the middle of what Junktion people these days call the Dry Season, and I remember it all. I remember the slogans in that lurid green paint, that seemed to be everywhere you turned. And the tattered bodies of Garm Heliko's rebels over the Greimplatz, while Yellow Jancy sat underneath and laughed up at them. I remember looking into the dead eyes of the Escher girl lying in the muck of the puffball forest by the Shining Falls trail, with scawies yelping and howling all around us. I remember the Steelheads and the Firebrands, the burning at Mirror-Bitten, Brother Hetch. Sometimes when I can't sleep I remember the sound of rats' feet on hollow metal ducts, or carrion-bat wings in among the gantries under Walking Man.

And I remember sweat and sharp, acid air. The noise of the winch. Brass armour shining in the stablight beam and Sebyo saying 'hey you two, what's coming down? You see that?'

We were in the number-four Winchnest, right on the end of a snapped-off girder sticking out into the Well. The winchboys had thought that there was a problem with the juice tap that fed the winches and the big pintle stablight. There wasn't, but it had taken me more than an hour of sweaty, nail-biting work to find that out, crawling up and down the girder trying to ignore that space all around and above me and the great big

drop down to the Junktion rooftops. I'm an Underhiver, I like my tunnels and crawlways and boltholes, and when I'm out in open space like that I keep thinking I can feel the empty air plucking at me with little invisible fingers.

And of course the real problem was just that the cowlings over the cable-join was loose and the juicewire had grown a coat of green rust-rot. If I'd known that at the start I could have spliced it in ten minutes and be back on the winch-carriage (and if you think standing on a catwalk is bad, try riding in one of those rat-spat things), on my way to a firm Underhive floor and knock-off for the day. Sebyo and Backni were fussing over the signal lamps and pretending not to notice how angry I was.

'Hey you two, what's coming down? You see that?'

I didn't and I didn't care. Keeping the panniers moving was their business, not mine. It took a minute for me to realise that Backni was standing motionless a double armlength away from me, staring upward, mouth open.

What kind of spider? Junktion paid its trappers well to make sure that the spiders and carrion-bats and ripperjacks never got near the Well, but someone had slipped up. That was my first thought.

There were cables dropping down the Well all around us. Sebyo panned the pintle-light around and we saw two, three, four, half a dozen, a dozen more. The other winchnests had seen them too and all the crews were shining lights around. The lines flashed pale in the crisscrossing beams. They hung almost vertical, only swaying a little. There wasn't much



movement in the air that day. What kind of spider lowered a trapline straight down like that?

Not spiders. Now I saw what Sebyo had seen. A flash of movement. High up. One of the stablight beams hitting metal. Never saw a spider that colour. Human shapes, clipped to the hanging lines, coming down all the lines at a smooth even speed.

There were calls from each nest they passed, and of course we were too surprised and stupid to work out why until they passed us too.

They wore scrolled and polished carapace armour and full helmets that covered their heads and shoulders. Beautiful bronze-coloured armour, the colour of aged sipping-liquor. Their faces bulged with darkvisors and machine-sights. There were grenades and limpet-meltas pouched at their hips and fat-barrelled fast-fire hellguns slung at their backs.

One of them was coming down the line nearest us now, near enough for me to see the Hive City Militia emblems etched into his armour and hear the soft buzz of the climb-harness that was lowering him. Buying kit like that would send an Underhiver broke for a year. The visor was turned toward me, watching me without expression. The hand dipped toward the belt.

That broke the spell. I yelled something half-coherent and ran. I left the other two standing in the winchnest and raced down the spar, running for the little burrow in the rockcrete wall where the winchboys slept and ate. My feet thumped on the catwalk's rubber grip-mats.

I remember looking over my shoulder. Backni right behind me, the same fear in his face, yelling my name: 'Kass! Kass!'. Sebyo, slower, still at the pintle-light railing, and the man in the bronze armour, his hand coming around in a languid, easy throw. I remember the soft sound of the grenade landing on the matting as I threw myself forward and a wordless cry from Sebyo, running just fast enough that he couldn't stop running towards it.

I remember lying on my face in the burrow with my ears full of static from the blast. I remember hearing Sebyo's scream - he wasn't so badly hurt that he couldn't cry out as it threw him over the railing and down the Well. I remember Backni taking four more rattling breaths and falling silent.

And I remember my hearing coming back as I lay there willing my limbs to move, in time to hear the sounds coming up the Well. They were faint and echoing but unmistakable - the snap of lasfire, the rattle of stubber-fire, the boom of grenades.

That's the starter, the kick-off; the memory of Hive City coming down to Junktion to take us apart.

# 1: WATER FOR ALL

## WATER FOR ALL, NOT JUST THE RICH.

The words were written in letters of glow-green paint, three feet high against the wall of the Upper Six road-pipe out from Junktion towards Twodog and Dying Gorge. The light was bright enough to catch the paint and make it almost leap off the rough metal behind it and the writing was rough and angry. You could imagine the knuckles of whoever had held the jet-brush, white and shaking as they had painted the slogan on. It grabbed the eye just the way the painter must have wanted it to.

It had grabbed someone else's eyes already. Filling most of the roadpipe, shuffling on the packed dust and slag-gravel that made up the walkable floor, a knot of sombre grey shapes regarded the words. I stopped about a dozen paces away, letting them realise I was there and get used to me. Junktion is safer than most parts, but there isn't anywhere in the Underhive where it pays to startle a crowd of strangers, and lately people round here had more reason than usual to think with their trigger fingers.

There's a body language and a way of walking that most Underhivers know and I used it now. Small steps so I wasn't rushing at them, face neutral, one hand on the holster at my hip so they knew it was there. I think I looked more confident than I felt. All of the shapes were pretty much the same, silent lumps about human height. No faces, just thick vulcanised

dust-hoods that dropped down into knee-length ponchos, belled out like a sting-jelly's skirts where packs and satchels were slung underneath them.

For a minute they just stood in the dimness and I had one quick moment of alarm, then the shape furthest front yanked back his hood and turned into a tired-looking man, maybe ten years older than my thirty-two, with sweat on his forehead and grey stubble on his chin. He pointed the chin at the far wall and then looked back at me.

'We hadn't heard about this.'

Hadn't heard things were drying up? I didn't say it outright but the question must have shown on my face.

'The attack we heard about. Not this. Things this bad up here already?'

He was watching me carefully. You can pick up a lot from how someone reacts to strangers asking about their town. This guy had the trick of it, but not of hiding his interest. I didn't give anything away. I'm good at that. Ask anyone I've played Ko'Iron Six-Card with.

'Few people are unhappy about the rationing, I guess,' I said after a moment. 'Lot of these slogans around now.'

We looked at the letters together.

'Bizer Enning', he said eventually. He had the accent of someone from the Twodog gantry-tunnels, overemphasising his words from having to talk through the heavy cloth mask that kept the lichen-mites out of the mouth and nostrils. Enning wasn't the name of any of the bigger Twodog families I knew

of, but that didn't necessarily mean anything.

'Sinden Kass,' I told him back, and we nodded to each other.

'How would a newcomer get a water ration, then?' he asked. His voice had made the question casual but his eyes said otherwise. I spread my hands.

'Can't tell you. Lot of people have come in from the badlands since the raid, wanting rations. You can't buy an allowance any more.' Not without some strategic choices in friends, anyway, but I didn't say it. 'The rules change on the hour, it seems like. You'd find out the latest at the gates.'

He nodded and glanced back at the other shapes behind him. They didn't seem so threatening now.

'How far down the way, then?'

'About an hour of walking. Maybe another quarter more, depending. It's downhill, but if you've come a way...' He nodded, looking a little more tired, and started to fumble with the edges of his hood.

'Safe, do you think, or should we...' He made a downward-patting gesture by his hip, the gesture for 'be fight-ready'. I grinned at him.

'Relax, sir. You're on your way to Junktion. Haven't you heard the stories?' He managed a smile back at that, and pulled the hood all the way on to turn into a shape again. I watched them as they set off down the roadpipe, with soft steps that soon blended with the little creaks and echoes that you hear in the Underhive all the time.

I went over the conversation as I went about my work by the scrawled-on wall. For a while I felt a little bad about acting so cool about Junktion's safety, but I soon put it out of mind. Things weren't that bad around Junktion, after all. At least they weren't back then.

\* \* \*

The light-tile I was there to work on was the furthest point of the rounds for that lightson, and the one I wanted most to get out of the way. I hadn't admitted it to Enning, but the letters on the wall here were new, and so were the last two I'd seen on the way there, and there were more around all the time in the weeks since the raiders had hit Junktion. I had had to get back into the habit of keeping my coat tucked back behind my holster and the fast-draw flap down.

The tile itself was still glowing, which was just as well. There are fixtures around Junktion that we lamplighters know how to repair, but those upper-circuit roadpipe tiles with their bright white glow are definitely not an example. But the framing was hanging loose and the reflector slats were badly gunked and that I could do something about. I got the housing back into position with only a little cursing, and the grime and crap came off the slats easily enough. By the time I was done the tile was bright enough to read my map by, which I hadn't been able to do before, and that's my test for a job properly done. The

brighter light made the graffiti even more brash than before. WATER FOR ALL, NOT JUST THE RICH. Flashes of the colour kept jumping into the corner of my vision as I walked away.

The next stop was the only really nasty one, seeing to one of the arclights on the elevated bridgeway that climbs up to the Shining Falls trail and crosses the cavity between old hive domes. The cavity floor is carpeted by fungi with these big, glistening, dish-like pads that people say like to drink the light. I've heard if you shine a lamp down onto them you can actually see all these cups of white fungus-flesh shivering and trying to turn to the lantern-beam. Balancing out on the stanchions in all that open space is bad enough, but the thought of those nodding white saucers all stirring underneath, waiting for the light to come back on, made it worse. Even with my clip-line a job out on the girderwork out there can never be over soon enough.

Luckily it was a quick job. The rubber coating had been stripped off the juice feeds by decay or some gnaw-happy local wildlife specimen, and I had enough replacement stuff in my pack. Some peddler Thamm knows brings it up from deeper downhive. I have no idea where they harvest it from, but if you melt the salvaged stuff a little you can knead it into place easily enough.

I finished up in good time and was walking back down the bridgeway within half an hour, swearing to myself as I always

do that before we had to fix those damn feeds again I'd call in a favour with one of Junktion's jackleg foundrymen, and get little cages made to keep the vermin off the arclight arrays. With my own cash if I had to, I had enough to spare and I hated the bridge jobs enough for it to be worth the expense. There had been more stories from further down that way, too. Attacks by feral ratpacks and swoopspiders, even scavvies if you believed the rumours, things that had been drawn out of the badlands since the attack, looking for water and finding prey. I didn't think anything would come this close to Junktion, but you never knew. I was thinking about bringing back the old arrangement from when Nardo and I first lit the bridgeway, one working on the lights and the other one standing guard with a piece at the ready.

I could see Nardo ahead of me now as I came slogging down off the bridgeway and through the wreckage and giant branching fungi that ring the Fog Flats. The chem-fog was only just starting to really thicken as the air chilled on its twenty-hour cycle, and the lights from Junktion's walls beyond us were still individual points of light instead of the orange glow that they would become when the vapour was at its thickest. We'd be gone by then: at their thickest the fogs had some kind of stinging taint to them that drove the toughest winch-crews indoors.

Nardo was leaning against the biggest of the line of corroded girders that ringed the winchport, holding up an ungainly curtain of razorwire and trap-chains. He was easy to pick out: like me he had his pack and tool belt, his little collapsible ladder sticking up over his shoulder and the pool



of light from his lantern-pole bobbing around him. There's no official markings for Junktion's lamplighters, no Guilder-style medallions or colours like the gangs wear, but you can tell us by our kit. Good gear and good clothes. We get looked after.

'More slogans around,' I told him as we walked. The Junktion lights were growing brighter, and to our left the fungus forest was thinning out into the spore-orchards and metal humpies of the Peelgut plantations.

'Yeh. Saw 'em myself. Same as the others.' Nardo had never said where he was from, but he had the thickest muttering downhive accent I'd ever come across.

'Same?' I asked him. 'More of the "water for all" ones?'

'Yeh, some o' those. Few others. "Junktion water's our water". Like that.'

'Haven't seen any of those,' I said as Nardo darted a look around and slid a water-flask out of his coat. 'Only different one I saw was near the old feral pits at the bottom of the roadpipe, up on one of those big hanging vent covers. Same green paint. Said "We shall fight and we shall drink."'

I was grinning. Nardo had taken a mouthful of water before he thought about it, started laughing and had to gulp and double over before he could get it swallowed. I saw some figures around drum-fires inside the liftport looking around curiously, but lamplighters tend to get left to their business.

Think that's quite what they're after?' I asked Nardo. "'We shall fight and we shall drink.'" Might even get a few more recruits that way. Let 'em think they're on their way to a piss-

up.' Nardo thought about it again and laughed again, and this time he did choke. Water spurted out of his mouth and soaked the stubble on his chin and the front of his heavy grey tunic. I clapped him on the shoulder.

'Look at you, then, stuck-up spoilt lamplighter on your water stipend. Get ten Guilder chips for that in the Square.'

'Screw you, rich man. How much y'got stashed in that hole of yours? Hoarding y'water, y'bastard.'

We traded elbow jabs and kept walking. Nardo and I were the two oldest lamplighters, with five years or more on Venz, Mudeye or Thamm, but we were good enough friends that we caught ourselves acting like juves when we were on rounds together. Thamm even made jokes about us being twins although we looked nothing alike - me long and lean and pale under my broad hat, Nardo with his stocky shoulders and squashy, jowly face and rolling way of walking. But we worked well together. We got on.

Nardo gave me a swig from his flask. The water tasted brackish and metallic, the way it always seemed to now the town was using the emergency cisterns. Then he realised he was walking along with his flask on show and stowed it again in a hurry, and after that we went on in uneasy silence. This was not the sort of conversation people were supposed to have in Junktion.

Junktion. Fortress-town, meeting of roads, trading post. Boom-town, sitting at the bottom of the Junktion Well, sprawled on top of the Piles. Come and visit us sometime.

It happens anywhere in the Underhive where any two trails

or through-halls or roadpipes meet. Any joining of roads has its drinking hole, or flophouse, or at the least a half-arsed communal dust-tent and a scruffy knot of pedlars hawking food and lucky charms. At places like Junktion, where one of the big uphive collapses has torn a hole down through the guts of the hive, you get something bigger. Not the biggest of the Underhive's collapse pits, definitely nowhere near that great chasm at Dust Falls where you can't see one side from the other even with a stablight and anything you toss in will fall all the way to the Sump. But it's big enough to be valuable.

Nardo and I were close enough now to see where the Junktion lights sloped up the sides of the Piles. That was where the rubble had settled, all the smashed rockcrete and ripped metal that had cascaded down to make the Well. Some time long after the collapse a band of now-nameless wanderers found that it had settled enough to be stable and set up a camp that turned into a permanent enclave, that turned into Junktion. The giant Black Pile with the brightly-lit cisterns and sentry tower at its top, across the sludge canal the Red Pile where most of the collapsed metal seemed to have landed and rusted. The little nub of Guilders' Hill was too small for us to make it out over the wall and through the thickening fog. We both walked a little faster.

If I took my eyes off the sides of the Black Pile and looked quarter-turn to my right, I could see a point of light moving unsteadily upwards. A second to listen and I could hear the faint grind of the winch. Someone's cargo, off up to number-one nest in among the rooms chopped into the rockcrete at the bottom of the Well, where the smashed shaft from the

collapse bellied out into the burrow that Junktion town lived in. From there it would go into another pannier to be hauled up to number-two nest in its half-collapsed dome; from there the cable from number-three nest would hoist it up through the broken roof and up to the bluff of packed rubble where the cable from-

('Hey you two, what's coming down? You see that?' The sound of the grenade.)

But I didn't feel like dwelling on number-four nest now.

Anyway, that's Junktion's real jackpot, right there. You've come up from the deep Underhive, up from Glory Hole or Blackenred, up from where most people have never seen light that came from a power lantern rather than a burning wick, or a gun that fired las-shots instead of slugs or scattershot. You've lugged your load of spider shells or eyes, or mutant pelts, pearl-spores, even archeotech, stuff that'll have the whiteneck uphive traders fighting to push creds into your hand. You reach Junktion, rest your feet, buy some refined booze and a night (or at least an hour) with someone you fancy who might even have all her fingers and toes, both eyes and no visible scars.

There would be enough of that even with just the roads. Junktion is where a lot of trails meet. Head twelveward and you can get on the roadpipes for Mirror-Bitten, Ghoul Bend, Scrubtangle, even Baiters' Dock down on the sludge lakes. In the other direction there's Shining Falls, and the big arterial pipe that opens up Dying Gorge, Tarvo, Wilhelm's Crossing, Coma Gulch and Twodog. But then there's the Well on top of

everything else.

Because when you're ready to move again, what's going to look better? Plod on up the trail through another hundred, hundred and twenty, hundred and fifty levels? (No, I don't know how many, I've never cared to stare up into all that empty air long enough to count them.) Spend weeks more in the roadpipes, risking wildlife, scawvies, bandits, quakes, gunk-floods? Or are you going to stay in Junktion, eat a nice late breakfast, and then roll yourself out to the liftport? Buy your winch chit from the town fathers and hand it off to the hauler crews, then you watch as your goods get hoisted up to be at the stockade up there by the next lightson?

Don't listen to the grumbling you hear about Junktion prices, about how the only difference between the Junktion town fathers and a bandit gang is how the bandits don't bill you for wear and tear on the gun they hold to your head. For every pannier that gets hauled up the Well you can bet there are five caravan bosses cursing the lucky bastard whose cargo it is and jockeying for the next chit, and ten more setting off through the roadpipes and wishing like hell they could afford a winch passage at all.

So, Junktion the trade-town, the boom-town. Once there's money flowing through a town in the Underhive, well, people with money need guns and ammo and people to use them on their behalf, and they want booze and smokes, and the people who provide them with those need food and juice and parts and entertainment of their own. And there are plenty of things that nobody would ever think they needed at all except that

places like Junktion fill up with folks who'll provide them anyway. Soothsayers, kootchie-girls, or amiable gentlemen who get mysteriously luckier with the cards once their opponent has a few shots of Second Best inside them (and turn out to have some burly, bad-tempered friends in the event someone gets pushy about it).

So the place has a reputation in this corner of the Underhive. It's in Junktion, people have said around here for more than seventy years, and in the Underhive that can be nearly three lifetimes. Whatever you need, it's in Junktion. Whatever you need, go to Junktion.

Which was why Nardo and I were suddenly walking in silence. Why the slogans about fighting made me uneasy, why watching Nardo hide his water flask was worse. Junktion was a town that made money. It was the town where people came to live large. It wasn't the town where you were supposed to have to look over your shoulder before you took a drink. It wasn't the town where you found your conversations circling around and around the idea of revolt.

I'd been counting on my train of thought about the town to distract me from what we were walking past, but it didn't work. Our feet were crunching through scorched debris, and as we came up the little slope away from the Fog Flats to Junktion's sixward gate the smell of ash started to mingle with the chemical scent of the fog.

This had been the shanty belt, the usual dribble of lean-tos

and tottery dust-awnings that crust around any big settlement. A couple of lightsons after the raid, the smell of gunsmoke was still in the town's nostrils. People were twitch-eyed and fever-hot for someone, anyone to take it all out on, and the shanties had been right there to see. There wasn't even the hassle of leaving the town - most of the shacks were in shooting distance of the walls. When the mob of Junktioners whose anger trumped their laziness poured out of the gate to start torching the shacks, the town wall became a regular little shooting gallery as a second mob lined the parapet and picked off the poor bastards who came running out of their burning camp. For hours afterwards in the Greimplatz drinking holes I had to listen to man after man swaggering in, bragging about their tallies, patting smoking guns and assuring one another that this was the stuff, this was what it was all about, those uphive bastards were lucky they'd caught us by surprise, next time it'd be different, you mark me...

'Ain't pretty,' said Nardo from beside me. My thoughts must have shown in my face, and he'd mistaken it for a reaction to what was in front of us.

Junktion had swapped one camp of cast-offs for another. Under the row of acrid orange gate-lamps they spread out in a sea of packs, dirty blankets and dispirited faces. Travellers, refugees from the deadlands and holesteads who'd come streaming in here when the water-lines ran dry. Whatever you need, go to Junktion, remember? So here they were.

I was carrying my water flask rolled well into my tool pack where it wasn't visible, and Nardo had his under the hang of

his dust-shawl. Not that it mattered. The voices started up before we were a quarter of the way through the sprawl of grey figures.

'Got a drink?'

You got water? C'mon, how about some water!' 'Water? Do they have it? Ask 'em, tell 'em how far we've come!'

Nardo was meeting eyes and shaking his head. I kept my eyes ahead of me and down, watching the patch of ground in front of me and the toes of my boots going forward and back, forward and back. I was dreading someone actually stepping out in front of me - not a kid, please the ghosts not a kid - or a hand on the sleeve or tail of my frock-coat. But holestealers are a tough bunch, proud as hell the way you have to be to keep a place running in a tract of Underhive, and none of them tried it.

Closer to the gate the crowds were standing not sitting, and the ones who weren't looking up and shouting at the gate-guards were walking along with us, staring or hailing us. They were feistier than the wasted specimens further away, either more recently arrived and not as used up or maybe just more desperate. The pleas were changing their tack too.

'Can you get us in?'

You know the people on the gate, do you? What's a name? C'mon, just tell me a name I can ask for, you can do that.'

Head forward, eyes down. Nardo next to me saying 'No, no, sorry' over and over again.

'I can work, everyone in my family can. My wife can read



and write and so can I, a little, look, take this, take this to show to someone...'

'You're the lamplighters! You're the lamplighters, aren't you! I know juice stuff, I can do that work! I can help you, just get me and my son in there and we can...'

'I got information! I can tell you 'bout the gangs, the gangs are coming up from the Crossing, they'll be here, you need to know, lemme in and I'll...'

And then we were at the edge of the mob in front of the little door that had been opened in the gate itself, and some of the gate guards were stepping forward with short clubs and mesh-wrapped fists. Their voices easily overrode the others: these were men used to shouting down a crowd.

'Aside! Go on, move it, you scrawny bastards, get out of the way. There are honest Junktion folk here!' Malley put both barrels of his shotgun into the air and emptied them over the crowd's heads to make his point, and the mob around the gate flinched and split apart. No Underhiver is a stranger to gunfire, but we also tend to have a well-developed take-cover reflex when we're surprised, and Malley overpacks his cartridges to make the shots shockingly loud.

Nardo stayed behind me for a moment to make his spread-hand gesture at the crowd falling back behind us, but I was already stepping through the gate-door, head down. Some of the cries I could hear under Malley's shouts were desperation, but some were pain now. The barrels of that shotgun were so short that some of the pellets must have grazed people in the crowd even with the high angle of the shot. I thought of the

conversation I'd had with Enning and wondered if he'd made it down the roadpipe. I'd have liked to think I'd have felt his eyes on me if he had, but even then I suppose I wouldn't have looked up to meet them.

I pushed the thought aside and walked away. In the Underhive you can't get too attached to people. To anything at all. You have to learn to let it go and walk away. So I kept my head down and walked away, and then the gate clanged shut behind us and I didn't have to think about it any more.

## 2: WHAT HAPPENED TO THE LAMPLIGHTERS

I was glad to get away from the gates. Pushing through the crowd had brought up some bad memories. I thought I had heard my sister's voice in among the shouting, but that happens sometimes when I let things get to me. Tanny isn't anywhere where her voice is going to reach me now. I kept my head down and picked up my pace along the Quicklime Road until I realised Nardo wasn't next to me any more.

He was standing back by the rubble-and-mortar pillar that the town watch had put up to remember those of them who'd died on the job. The dead ones' names were painted up high in angular red letters. Many of them fresh, many of the fresh names painted less tidily as the letterer had been borne down by having to record so many dead at once. The raid had taken a toll of the town guards. Lower down, at eye level under hanging stringlights, were plastered decrees and notices from the town fathers. Nardo tilted his head toward the creased yellow proclamation-sheets.

'Notice anything different?'

It was hard not to. Last lightson there had been maybe a dozen bounty placards around the column: a couple of thieves, a medicine-counterfeiter, someone who'd beaten up a town father's favourite kootchie-girl.

And a whole handful of double-size posters of Master Volk

and Brother Hetch, two hardcore Red Redemption crazies who'd muscled into the leadership of a stragglng Cawdor gang called the Firebrands and turned them into a trigger-happy, fire-starting nightmare. Back before the Firebrands finally got driven away from Wilhelm's Crossing, talk had it that they had the charred bodies of nearly a dozen bounty hunters hanging from the girderwork where they made their camp, and they were adding to the collection every time the bounty was raised.

But this lightson the sinister black Redemption masks were gone, and copies of a new bounty-poster had been pasted up almost edge to edge right round the column. Payment in water and five hundred creds in Guilder chips for Garm Heliko, dead or alive. Nardo and I looked at the price, looked at each other, and started walking again.

A price on Heliko's head was no real surprise. It was a matter of record that he had tried to take out town father Gartch's convoy to Baiters' Dock, and most of us took it for granted he was behind the water-rebel slogans, or in with the people who were. It was the same thinking as behind the trashing of the shanty town. Climb all the way up past the Well to Hive City proper and take on the men who'd sent the raiders down on us? A joke. Most Underhivers will live and die without ever getting within spitting distance of the City. So the anger and the pain got taken out on whoever was convenient. On someone like Garm Heliko.

That was about where my thoughts were when I got to the end of the list of charges under Heliko's scowling portrait and

almost choked. Nardo, who'd reached it before me, was grinning.

"What y'think of that?"

'That is not serious. They're saying Heliko was in league with the raiders! A scout for them? What spit-blind idiot thought that up? It's an insult, them expecting us to believe that!'

I thought about the raiders.

('Hey you two, what's coming down? You see that?' The sound of the grenade.)

Their weapons, their kit, their numbers. Hive City soldiers, bought and trained and armed with Spire money. This hadn't been a turf skirmish or smash-and-grab like the badzone gangs or tinpot little holestead confederacies like to stage. It had been a punishment raid. Trade tariffs too high or a town father had impounded the wrong crate of booze for his personal stash or someone had been rude to a Guilder with connections or some spitting thing. They had been sent down to kick us apart like a boy kicking a scrapebeetle nest after he's been stung. You hear of it happening sometimes, when an Underhive place within hitting distance of Hive City gets too big for itself. There's not usually much anyone can do.

But now we were supposed to believe that the cream of the Hive City's army was in league with Garm Heliko? I was almost outraged. Nardo was chuckling. We swapped disbelieving remarks back and forth as we walked down Quicklime Road.

Heliko had made a living around Junktion for, well, I didn't know, long enough to get half-known the way some do if they stay in town for a while. Born of no particular House, from no particular place, fought for no particular side. Underhive scummers, they're called. Sump-gunnies. They drift from settlement to settlement, wherever their feet and the gun-and-muscle work takes them. Hire on with a trail boss here, take a couple of chips to fight with a gang there, then on to another town to drink the earnings and look for more of the same.

I thought I remembered Heliko having some part in the gang-wars between the Berserkers and the Exers around the Highshack Causeway. Nardo said Heliko had been in the thick of it when the Berserkers and the Curse banded together to take on Volk's Firebrands and drove those crazies down toward Wilhelm's Crossing. We couldn't remember which side he'd been on, and it didn't really matter. Gangs only ever carried grudges against one another's full-blooded members: paid hangers-on like scummers and ratskins were generally agreed to be just business. Nothing personal. One of those Underhive things.

I definitely remembered him weighing-in in the boozy riots in Cyclops Square the previous year, and talk was that after that he'd signed on as a caravan guard and lain low on the trail to Ghou Bend. Things must have blown over eventually because he'd shown up back in Junktion, helping someone who was supposed to be his brother run cheap liquor and crappy bargain-rate ammo from people he knew in Column Forest and Twodog.

'Fought like a bastard when they came for him,' I told Nardo. I'd been in the slums around Highdome that day, looking for a man who owed me for a half-dozen spreadlight filaments, and I'd heard the shots and the yelling. Heliko had been the first to start hoarding water after word came back from Penman's Deep about what the raiders had done to the pumping plant. Not many people had imitated him. Water wasn't going to run out altogether in Junktion, we were a boom-town, that kind of stuff happened to miserable little holes at Hive bottom where, you know, other people lived.

'Got greedy, though,' Nardo commented as we walked past a gaggle of dispirited whores at the top of Anselm's Alley and started walking carefully down into the gloom. We both put our hands on our guns and slowed our pace down so we could make sure to see what was ahead of us. The Alley was a good short cut to the town fathers' bunkerhouse, but it went right through the warren of crowded, stinking rookeries crammed in between Greimplatz and the Quicklime Road. It had been a while since anyone had actually died in the Alley, but you never knew.

Nardo had been right. Garm Heliko had gotten greedy, too pleased with himself undercutting the town fathers' prices and too enchanted by the idea, in that weird time right after the raid trashed us, that somehow all bets were off, that anything went. The town watchmen went straight for Heliko.

'Put up a fight, eh?' said Nardo.

'That's right. Faced them down, I heard. Stood in his door with a pistol in each hand.' Classic scummer bravado, but

futile. He'd disappeared from his rathole as a watch flamer filled it with burning goop. Must have had an escape hole somewhere, and one way or another he disappeared. He was seen once in Tarvo trading ammo for food, and then he was gone.

Nobody much bothered about where. He was still just a sump-gunny with pretensions. If it had been a reputable citizen you might have heard more about it, but a lowlife like Heliko? Someone like that deserved to have his water taken off him. Everyone had said so.

'So why that much, and not until now?' I asked Nardo as we picked our way down the alley. 'If they're dumb enough to believe that a scummer like Heliko was caught up in the raid somehow then why are they only saying so now?'

'It's a gimmick,' Nardo decided as we came out into the light again. As we crossed the rough open ground where the Brotherhood Road petered out and made for the bunkerhouse I asked him what he meant.

Trick. They want us t'get fired up at Heliko. They don't believe he's a raider themselves, I reckon. Fathers're spooked about the slogans, so if they make him out as a raider they get us angry an' they get him faster.'

I thought it over as we walked to the bunkerhouse doors. It had some surface logic, but... Hive City raiders and Garm Heliko? Was anyone in Junktion dumb enough to actually believe the connection?

There was something else that was nagging me. Not about the new poster, but about the column. I blinked and tried to



work out what it was as the bunkerhouse wall loomed over us.

When the raiders touched down in Junktion the Greimplatz was the first place they took apart. Shoot what moves and burn what doesn't. The gunfire from that opening act of the massacre had been what had come echoing up the well and into my blast-stunned head at number-four nest. There are still times when those echoes make it into my dreams.

When they got to the bunkerhouse they got serious. Almost everyone they'd run into so far was dead or fled, the town watch either mowed down before they really understood what they were dealing with or still on their way from elsewhere in town. So the only real fight at the bunkerhouse was from the fathers' personal muscle. There had been some sporadic shooting out of the sniper-holes in the upper floors, but from here I could see the tight patterns of shot-marks around each hole where return fire had taken out anyone who dared stick out a gunbarrel.

Then they had gone to work on the big shutter-doors and that was when things got really scary, Thamm told me later, because the stuff they had to do that was good. Not the gas-drills and sputtering red-glowing melta grenades you get with gangs who go in for hardware damage, but stuff most Underhivers won't see but once or twice in a lifetime. Long-necked cutting torches the same gleaming bronze as their carapace armour and white-hot meltas that brought the gates down in the time that their gang-made cousins would have

taken to warm up. Even now the doors still hung in a creepy derelict lean.

I'd been friends with half a dozen of the bunkerhouse gunboys, and I'd been to wakes for five of them. If I tilted my head forward a little the brim of my hat hid most of the wall and I didn't have to look at the shot-marks any more.

'Water for all, not just the rich.'

'Four,' said Nardo. He had forced his voice out of its usual mutter and up to a civilised level for the occasion.

You?'

'Me? Um.' I looked around and thought. 'About two.'

'About. Two.' Town father Roben Harnos was giving me his death look with those weird eyes. They were regular and blue-grey, almost the same colour as mine, but somehow all you noticed were the pupils. They were tiny, needle-hole tiny, but when he was glaring at you the pupils were all you could look at. I looked at Yonni instead, which wasn't much better. He was standing behind Harnos's shoulder, shifting from foot to foot. Dealing with the town fathers or their flunkies always made him do that, shift and squirm as though his skin was trying to crawl around backward. He was giving me his usual look, too, like whatever was going on between him and his nerve endings was my fault.

'What else?' Harnos wanted to know.

""Junktion water is our water", ' said Nardo. 'Couple o'

those.'

'It spitting well is, is it?' said Harnos. His hands were laced behind his back. He never needed to write down anything he was told. Ever. That was high on the list of things that unsettled me about him. 'Alright, what else? Kass?'

'Um. "We shall fight and we shall drink." First one of those I've seen.' The tiny black points stayed fixed on me. Apparently he wanted something more. 'But it was the same paint and the same, um, hand. Um.' Talking to Harnos was never a very dignified business for me.

Our reports didn't seem to please him much. He rocked on his heels for a moment, pointing his needle-hole eyes at me then Nardo, and then the interview was over. He gave Yonni a sharp nod and spun on his heel, marching away with quick stiff steps. It was the kind of thing that Town Father Roben Harnos liked to do. Waiting for him by the stairs up to the bunkerhouse's next level was a man I didn't recognise, younger than me, with smooth narrow features and a heavy, shrouded disc around his neck that could only be a Guilder medallion. He watched me watching him, then as Harnos passed him he gave me an odd, too-amiable smile and went after the town father. I blinked and shook my head.

'New orders, gents,' Yonni was telling us, instantly more relaxed now the father and the Guilder were gone. He was one of Junktion's first lamplighters and now the most senior, a sort of foreman. I thought whenever I saw him in the bunkerhouse that his real place was sdiid out at the town limits with tool pack and gun, but he kept insisting to us, sometimes

before we could ask, that he liked the bunkerhouse fine. He still looked out of place, though, a craggy man with a jaw like a building-joint and a weird diagonal bald patch where he'd gashed his scalp on a girder and spore-rash had got into it. He had powerful hands that looked like they would be wasted on anything less epic than wringing a Spyrer's neck. He'd been known as the Big Man since before I could remember.

'New orders?' I wasn't sure I liked the sound of it. Nardo was inspecting his fingertips the way he did when he was hoping the conversation would stop happening.

'Harmos gave them to me while we were waiting for you,' Yonni went on. Thamm and Mudeye and Venz already know, we had a talk with when they got back from the Grindholes.' Yonni looked around, sighed and jerked his head for us to follow him downstairs.

We had had our little debriefing in what Mudeye had started calling the Bootlickers' Gallery, the rooms one flight up from the bunkerhouse atrium. They'd seen some bad fighting late in the raid, when remnants of the watch had tried a counterattack and bunkerhouse gunboys had thought they were still going to make a last stand. None of the surviving town fathers felt inclined to move back into those rooms with the scars of bullet and bomb so fresh on the walls. Packs of cronies and second-order henchmen had set up in them instead, hoping they could step into the post-raid power vacuum just as easily.

When Mudeye had given the gallery its name he had joked about how the raid couldn't have broken the old Junktion spirit

too badly if there were still that many ghoulish ratbastards prepared to set up shop in these rooms before the old owners' brains had finished congealing on the floor downstairs. The rest of us hadn't found it particularly funny. The scared, glaring faces of the self-appointed flunkies in what was left of our town government were just another sign of what had gone wrong with the place, was all.

We stopped on the steps just short of the atrium. It was cut in below the level of the streets around it, so if anyone had been about their business outside we would have been able to look out of the window-slits at their boots. Nobody was.

"You know it's about the water," said Yonni.

'No, really? Farthest thing from my mind.'

That's enough, Kass. I can't, I mean I've been told...' he shot a look up the steps and dropped his voice to a rumbling whisper. 'Screw it. Look, I can trust you two with this, but not even to the other 'lighters, alright? It's not getting better any time soon. The towns up the Well are too scared of a second raid to let us have the help we need with the pumps, so anything we do on them we'll have to do ourselves. The rationing is only just starting to work and Gartch is coming back empty.'

That was a shock. Gartch was supposed to be leading his train back up from Baiters' Dock with a month's worth of water. There had been cheers in the streets when the news came through that he'd fended off the ambush from Heliko and his mob.

The Dock is a dead end,' Yonni said. 'Remember this is

between the three of us? You sure? Right. Yes, the Dock's on a sludge-lake. The stories about them purifying their water from it are all true. But their machines are crap, barely enough for their little town. The runners coming back ahead of the train say Gartch was barely able to get enough for his own people for the trip back.'

'And this all means what for our orders?' I asked him.

'Nothing big, Kass. Nothing much over and above, you know.' He was fidgeting again. 'What they want you to do is start keeping an eye out. The way you're doing. Harnos thought this "water for all" stuff would die off, but with Gartch coming back empty it's probably going to get worse. More of these slogans, more fighting.'

'More fightin'?' Nardo's voice was suspicious.

There's been trouble with the cistern near the Guilders' tor, some scuffles around the fathers' private supplies, someone trying to...' Yonni looked over his shoulder, 'someone trying to break into Wilferra's plantation to tap the pipes. All stopped, nothing you have to concern yourselves with. Your rations are both safe.' We looked at each other. 'But a debrief like this, that'll happen every time you come in from now on. They want you to report any new slogans you see around, how fresh they seem to be, whether the - Look, you're smart, you'll be able to tell what's important. About the slogans, or, you know.'

'Or what?' Nardo was looking at his fingers again but the question was still sharp.

'Or anything that's, you know, suspicious. Anything you see that you think the town watch needs to take action on. You're

smart people,' he said again, his eyes flicking, 'you know these are just not normal times.'

I signed on as a lamplighter, not a spy. The thought didn't fully form in my head until later but the feeling was there right from that moment. I wondered if I'd have to start reporting on who I saw at the drinking holes, what they were talking about and who to. Or if I was supposed to eavesdrop on the gate guards, or the traders on the Highborn road, or...

I was starting to get angry. I got careful and put on my card-player face, and Nardo looked at his fingers again, and before too much longer that interview was over too.

Nobody liked lingering in the atrium any more. The floor matting was shot-scorched and bloodstained from the random dozen fathers and flunkies that the raiders had dragged screaming down the steps and shot one by one. The last thing they did was make the rest of their captives watch while their leader slicked his gauntlet with blood and smeared it across the map of Junktion daubed on the atrium's long wall. None of the raiders had said a word to us, but the message was clear.

By the time the raiders shot and burned their way out of the bunkerhouse and across the Cash Bridge, nobody was really interested in trying to take them on. Most of the town were keeping their heads low, looking after what was theirs and silently willing the raiders to take another route. Organised resistance had finished with the gutting of the bunkerhouse, and it didn't take long for the people in the raiders' path to

work out that the fifty-fifty chance they stood if they tried to run or hide dropped to nothing if they stood and fought.

The poor bastards guarding Penman's Deep didn't have choice or chance. The shock of the raid lasted until well after the last trace of bronzed armour disappeared down the eightward trail. By the time anyone thought of the town crew out at the Deep, right in the raiders' path, and the surviving town watch quit talking about a posse and actually called one, it was way too late. The water-plant, the lamplighters all agreed later, had probably been on the raiders' maps from the beginning.

I'd come more or less out of my blast-daze by then, up in number-four nest, and I'd made it unsteadily back into my battered-up town by the time the posse came back. I remember sagging against a stablight gantry near the eightward gate, bent at the waist and woozily watching a drop of blood from my nose land in the trail dust in front of me. I was still dazed enough for my senses to feel sludgy and slow, and I had thought it was funny that the drop had fallen quick and true when everything else was drifting. I remember watching the pattern of shadows I cast in the gate lights, and thinking 'number seven's out, and if the mantle is smashed we've only got one spare in the bunkerhouse stores'.

I remember that because a moment later we heard the posse, and someone caught me as I tried to lurching towards the gate to hear them properly. They were calling out to us that they'd taken out the Deep, they'd killed Kinch and her whole crew, the pumps and the cleansers gone, they'd used kraks



and meltas and there was no water left in the cistern, no water left at all.

Nardo and I didn't spend long in the Greimplatz. We were really just killing time until lightsout, the last of the lamplighter rounds. The arclamp gantries over Junktion's nerve centres were all fed from a little rockcrete burrow near the bunkerhouse where Yonni spent his time, looking after a snakes' nest of heavy juice cables that led out to powertaps all around the town. Those we could kill all at once, but the alleys and roads in the other districts had to be snuffed out by hand. Most big settlements do this, or something like it. People just seem to do better when you snuff the lights right down every ten hours or so, just another one of those Underhive things.

So we wandered around the 'platz, killing time. It wasn't the same since the raid. Most of the shot-marks and debris were still around, and the people were quieter, wary. Greimplatz and Cyclops Square are usually impossibly loud, packed with the desperate energy you get when a critical mass of Underhivers all try to forget their troubles in a small space full of drinking holes, gambling houses and kootchie-joints. Now there was little talk, little shouting, no laughter.

We had a drink in one of the substreet holes, but neither of us had much appetite for it after hearing Yonni's news, or the secrets he wanted us to keep. I didn't want to be drunk around strangers, card-player's control or no. We watched Yellow Jancy sit in her corner of the 'platz, telling fortunes for those

who'd toss her a Guild chip and haranguing anyone who didn't. She didn't do either for me as I tipped my hat to her, but tapped the side of her nose and gave me a wink. I was still wondering what that meant as Nardo and I parted ways at the Quackstown ramp.

Where it flanked the sludge canal the Black Pile was too steep to build and too shaky to tunnel, so there was only a dark, dead bulk rising up to my right. Every ten paces on my left, a metal post on the canal edge held up a bundle of lanterns, a mixture of filament jobs and wick-burners. Yonni had set those up, after a pack of scawies braved the poisons in the gunk flow and tried to sneak up the canal. Junktion was smaller then, with more to fear from scavy bands, but with Yonni's work the canal had been well enough lit that the next raid that tried it was spotted and wiped out. Yonni wasn't the first lamplighter, but he was the one everybody respected the best.

That got me thinking about Yonni passing on Harnos's orders that we spy for him, and what it meant, and if I had anything to fear from it. (Or anything to gain. But fear was what had been in the air ever since the raid.) The questions were a net of sharp black wires in my mind, and I worked to pull coherent thoughts out of the tangle as my hands did the work on their own.

I was up against the centre pole, at the far curve of the trail, in the quiet strip where Guilders' Hill was a dim hint of wall over the canal and the lights from the platz were blocked out by the Pile. I was up on the ladder with my hands and face

right in the light, lost in my thoughts. I had just snuffed the last lantern on the pole when the hand gripped my arm, spun me off the ladder and crashed me flat on the trail.

I hit the ground already running on animal fear and adrenaline. My ladder and lantern-pole fell away and were kicked over the edge of the canal. My other arm was tangled in the strap of my tool pack and my laspistol was trapped between my body and the ground.

A shape stood where I had a moment ago. Dark cloth hood for a head, dark cloth mask for a mouth.

'Yeah,' it said. 'It's Kass. You going to do it or will I?' A boot hit my back and I yelled and scrabbled my feet. My tool pack was half under me, big and unwieldy and trapping my arm. My right hand flailed. My hat was off.

'Whoever, just hurry. We don't have much time.' The sound of a pistol leaving a holster. Another squirt of that animal fear.

I kicked myself over onto my front, got a leg under me. On one knee, I pivoted and swung my shoulder so the toolpack's weight carried me through a full turn before it crashed into the masked man. It took him by surprise and he staggered, off-balance, and didn't fire. The same movement brought the pack off my shoulder and I desperately flapped my arm free of the harness.

There was a curse behind me and I turned without getting up. The second man's knife, coming at a height that would have dropped my bowels out of my body had I jumped to my feet, instead scored across my forehead and scalp with the point. I grabbed at the knife-hand, desperate to choke the

return swing, and then the anger kicked in and I roared as I pushed myself half upright.

I wasn't strong enough to overpower the man's knife-arm straight away and he was about to grab the blade with his free hand anyway, but by then my own knife was out of my boot. My first slash went too high and tore his jacket, but when he grabbed for my blade in turn he gave away some of his balance and I used that, dropped my stance and made the second cut too low to grab, taking advantage of my crouch to open up the inside of his leg where big artery is.

He lost interest in me straight away, falling back and grabbing at the wound. I spun and now my pistol was out, the long-barrelled las that had never fizzled or flamed out on me yet. I sidestepped as I drew and as the silenced autopistol fired. The man I'd hit with my pack missed me by a hand's breath with a tight burst of shots, and before he could get his bearings I had time to pump the trigger four times. I was better in the dark than he was, even with my vision still adjusting from staring into the lanterns, and anyway he'd let himself get into silhouette in front of the lantern post.

He fell without a sound. I could smell the crisping of his clothes and flesh over the rotten smell of the canal as I dropped to one knee and took a bead on the third man, who'd thought that because he was standing back from the action he didn't need a weapon up. By the time he realised the mistake I'd shot him twice. Three staggering steps and he was over the edge of the canal.

The stubber in his hand gave one futile boom as he fell but

there was no way to tell where the round had gone.

The traces from the las-shots stabbed after-images into the haze the lanterns had left on my dark-vision. I rubbed my eyes with my fingers and tried to will them into recovering. There had been no more shots - were they all dead? I fanned the path ahead and behind me with the pistol. My grip on it felt jittery and weak. I rummaged in my tool pack for the hooded filament-lamp I used for close work. Where was the bastard thing, I knew I- no, here it was, and between it and the lanterns the gloom turned into an ordinary length of trail, gritty grey rockcrete, patches of lichen, spittle-stains. Two men, one shot, one bleeding out. He lifted his head and looked into the lamplight for a moment before it got too much and he went limp. He didn't have the strength to keep pressure on the wound and as I watched his hands fell away from it.

It wasn't the first time I'd killed, but I'm not the type to get better at it. Or to enjoy it. I stood there trying to make my mouth work, not sure what I was going to say. The fight-rush had soured and gone, and all I did was stand there with my light on the man while he died, until a pair of guards from the Black Pile cistern who'd heard that last stub-shot made their careful way down to where I was still standing, shaking, pointing my pistol and lamp.

They weren't anyone I'd known. The faces under the masks weren't familiar. Later on, from the town watch militiamen, I would find out who they were, for what it was worth. A journeyman metal-grinder from a salvage shop along the Twodog trail, a semi-pro gambler from the gaming holes

around Cyclops Square, an armourer from the fighting stables at Brass Pit. That was the one I'd cut and bled.

But right from the start I couldn't see why they'd come for me, used my name. They had thought about it, made sure they recognised me, followed me on the lightsout round to make sure they had dim light to take me in. The guards couldn't work it out and neither could I.

That was before we found out that Nardo had been grabbed by two men as he stepped out for a piss in the alleyway behind one of the hostels on the Dead Walk, and not found until half an hour later, fifty paces further down the alleyway and beaten within an inch of his life.

Around the time he and I had parted ways at the Greimplatz ramp someone had pitched a rough-made smoke grenade into the little sleeping-nook Thamm rented on the Twelve-Road and stabbed her four times as she came coughing out of the haze.

Mudeye had been dawdling at the tunnel that led from the Red Pile to Cyclops Square, flirting with a couple of the girls who worked the doss-houses there, when a man had stepped out of a doorway and shot him twice in the face. The man had been gone down an alleyway before the nearest of the girls had had time to scream.

And Venz, Venz who was better with a weapon than any of us, Venz was lying dead by the sixward end of the Helmawr Bridge over the canal. Two men with cloth masks and sawn-offs had caught him in a crossfire as he walked through the pedlars' markets there. He had got off one shot before he'd

gone down.

Nobody knew the plan and nobody knew the reason. Nobody knew if Thamm would live or die, or whether Venz had any next of kin, or how long it would take Nardo to regain consciousness. We didn't get any clues about any of it until someone spotted a new slogan, in the same green paint, halfway out to the ruined water station at Penman's Deep.

LAMPLIGHTER SPIES GET WHAT THEY DESERVE.

And that was when we all knew that whatever was going on in Junktion was now on in earnest.

# 3: STEELHEADS AT THE GATE

'Since when was this a lamplighter weapon?'

It was the first time the skinny little flophair that hung around the Gunnery had ever spoken to me, and the first time I'd ever heard him properly talk at all. Normally he was just a background presence in a grey Orlock slag-miner's jacket far too big for him, carrying boxes or hanging dust-shutters somewhere in my peripheral vision. Now he was looking at me with beady eyes that caught the shop lights in a way I didn't like.

'Since I decided to start carrying it.' That had taken me a couple of seconds. The answer that had come to my mouth had been softer than that. Bark a question at me and my reflex is to back off, answer in a pleasing way, no matter who asked or whether it's their business. I don't like that much, and I was pleased I'd managed to catch myself.

Thought you were supposed to be real popular.' That little cockroach gleam was still in the kid's eyes. Thought everybody liked the lamplighters. Thought you never got into trouble and you never got into...' The trash-talk rang a bit hollow from someone too vacant to string together more than three sentences in a row. That didn't make me feel as good as it should have.

Tovick broke the moment when he appeared behind the kid



and cuffed him hard enough to nod the unkempt head forward.

'Out of it! You can shoot your mouth when you've earned it, you sandbagging little grub. That crap around the hoist base I told you to shift is still there. You want to bet you'll lose hide over that if it's still there when I've finished attending on the gentleman.'

Flophair gave me one more cockroach glance and shuffled away. There was a sore on the back of his neck, and his greasy brown hair had matted into the discharge from it. Every Underhiver should know about looking after cysts and rashes and sores, there are enough damn things that'll give them to you. Was it petty to let a kid get to me like that who didn't even know to clean out a sore?

I suddenly realised Tovick had been talking.

'Sorry, distracted. Give it to me again?' He waved the question away.

'Don't worry about the little runt. He's getting ideas above himself. When he can carry a crate of shells across a room without half of them going on the floor, then you can bother noticing him. All I was saying was I hadn't seen the two-tone in an age. I was wondering if you still had it.'

He peered under the counter into the armoured drawers where he kept the autogun ammo. My heart sank for a minute - I suddenly realised I had no idea if there would even be the right ammo there to buy. Carrying lasweapons for too long makes you careless about things like that. Then he grunted and straightened up with two boxes in his hands.

'Good idea to make sure you're stocked up,' he told me as he counted out shells. \*Word is that not all of the trader caravans are so keen to come around here now.'

'The raid.'

'The raid indeed.' He inspected one of the rounds and closed the second box. 'Word of the troubles. People are wondering if we're worth the risk.' We stood in glum silence for a moment. Tovick broke it. 'Anyway, don't burn off any more of it than you have to. There's a smith down Shining Falls way who swears he can make an Escher knock-off that your piece won't tell from the real thing, but load yourself with real uphive ammo for as long as you can.'

'On that note,' I said, and the silence came back for a moment.

'I can give you some of this for the range, Kass, to keep your hand in,' Tovick said carefully. 'But it can't be the usual. Not the tab. Sorry, but with the way things are...'

He let the sentence hang until I made a that's-okay face and thumbed out a Guild chip. Tovick had got into the habit of throwing in a few extra rounds to the lamplighters on the tab he ran for the town fathers. It looked like that arrangement had gone the way of a lot of other things around the place since the raid came down.

'Leave the pistol with me, Kass. I can at least juice that for you on the house.' It was his way of apologising, and I slid the long-barrel far enough up my leg to pop the cell. I handed it over to Tovick and he muttered an artisan's lucky charm as he clicked it into a juicing sheath. I wondered whether to say

anything more, then shrugged and took the two-tone past the racks and piles of weapons ("Outlaw salvage, mak a offer, use at own risk" said a card propped on the last one) and into the little dead-end corridor that Tovick had sealed and sandbagged and dignified with the name of 'The Range'.

\* \* \*

'The two-tone' was Tovick's nickname for the only long-arm I owned, and I'd adopted the name myself for want of anything else to call it. It was a hybrid piece I'd saved up and paid well for back when I rode with the caravans on the big trader trails. The stock and frame were House Delaque build. Delaques are keener sneaks and spies than warriors, and their kit is perfect for someone like me. It's compact, smooth to handle, made to be quick and easy to stow and keep out of the way when you have to move fast and quiet, or to get up a girder or down a chute.

On the other hand, Junktion doesn't sit under Delaque territory. I think I've only been near their part of the Hive City once in my life, when my mother and sister were alive. I was young and Tanny was younger, and I don't know which of us was more scared of the Delaques, with their big pale puffball heads sunk down into the collars of those long coat-cloaks they wear, and their little shiny eyes the same colour as their skin. That whispering sound you hear is easy to mistake for

their clothes rustling until you realise it's their voices.

No, when you get a taste of Hive City around Junktion it's the bright splash of House Escher gunwomen with their braids and swaggers and loud garments, or House Goliath musclemen bellowing to each other and rattling the metal bands around their thick arms. Or the blue eyes and red bandanas of House Orlock, with their clipped accents that sound like they're disgusted with whatever they're talking about. You don't hear those sighing Delaque accents much and you get Delaque ammo even less. The Houses keep their people separate - it's why their looks are as distinctive as their dress and talk - and they keep their kit separate too. A Delaque gun without ammo of Delaque make is just ballast.

So it didn't take me long after I got to Junktion to work out that my piece needed a little reworking. Venz called in a favour from a smith at a Guilder bunker halfway up the trail to Scrubtangle, and the work was worth the tedious roundtrip up the alley-road. He fitted a new action and barrel from a gawky long-stocked piece he said had come from a House Escher caravan guard, then cut the barrel and tinkered with the action to fit them into the Delaque frame so that when I first hefted it I could barely tell the difference. It had kept its easy Delaque handling but fired the way Escher pieces do, quick and clean, with recoil but none of the jagged muzzle-climb that you can always pick the Goliath or Cawdor guns by, eating up Escher-make ammo smooth as you please.

The only sign of its mixed parentage was the colouring Tovich had nicknamed it for: flat gleamless Delaque black

from the old weapon, a bright powdery silver from the Escher breech and barrel. I kept meaning to dull it with grease the way the gangers do, but as Junktion got big enough to tame the wildlands around it there was less and less need for the two-tone and I'd simply got too complacent to unpack it.

Until now. It had been too long since I had held the thing in my hands, let alone fired it in anger. I wanted to remind my hand and my eye how it felt and shot. It was something I thought I needed to remember.

It felt fine and shot better. People who say you're either a las or a slug shooter, that you can get the hang of one or the other, are squeaking with it. Ignore them. I had remembered the kick as stronger, so overcompensation sent the first burst way off, but the right reflexes bobbed up after that and the two-tone burred off quick, tight bursts that walked up the strips of plas-sheet as the weapon rode my shoulder. By the time I was halfway through the magazine I was hitting comfortably inside the targets and by the time it clicked dry I had punched through the painted bullseye. I work with tools, I have mechanist's hands. I don't think I could ever use one of the damn great cannons that the Goliath gangs carry, but give me a precision instrument like the two-tone and I'll use it like one. I came out of the range hefting the empty gun, smelling of cordite and feeling much happier.

Thought you didn't need to tote a piece.' Oh, good, he was back again, lounging against a crate full of reconditioned las-

barrels. Thought you people didn't need to worry about the gangs or anything. Thought you people... y'know... hah. Uh.' That third consecutive sentence was still defeating him, but you wouldn't know it from the grin he was wearing.

Twenty minutes for that las-cell to get properly juiced, Kass, Tovich called from across the shop. Tell you what, don't waste it hanging around here listening to that runt. Just come back here before you head for the gate and I'll have it ready.'

The flophaired kid gave me a smug look, as though he'd won some kind of point. I ignored him. I had an attack of nerves at the top of the stairs, and went through two checks of the two-tone and three that the knife was in my boot before I went down them. I stopped in the awkward little elbow where the stairs had to fit around a mis-built corner, checked both of them again, and then I stepped out.

I'd been putting off going back to the bunkerhouse, and up until now there had been plenty of excuses. A grim conference with the town watch about the attacks, a visit to the incinerators at the head of the Chamberpit track to watch the three men I'd killed being rendered down to ash to fertilise the Peelgut farms. Back at my rooms I'd barely been able to sleep and had sat through lightsout putting an extra edge on my knife, fixing a hook to the new lantern-pole and cleaning the two-tone. Good mind-occupying business, but it was done now, and on my way to the bunkerhouse once again there was no way to avoid having to think about what had happened to

the others.

Lamplighter spies get what they deserve. Lamplighter spies.

Someone out there had declared war on us. Someone knew about what we'd been asked, sump-ghosts knew how. And someone had hit out at us.

At us, or at the town fathers? Water was for all, not just the rich. Was that what this was about? I thought of Nardo hiding his water flask as we walked back from our rounds. But everyone knew about the lamplighters' water rations, didn't they? I couldn't remember hearing about any resentment. We were the lamplighters, everyone in Junktion knew about what we did. How had it come to this?

I went cold at a memory: Yellow Jancy winking at me the previous night in the Greimplatz. I had thought she didn't care to tell me my fortune, but was I wrong? I looked for her as I clanked across the 'platz's grill-metal floor, but her little nook was empty.

Suddenly nobody was around - Junktion was a city of strangers. No Nardo to drink with or Yonni to talk with. A sour-faced little flunky in a fringed vest of rat-leather shoved an order sheet into my hand and barked at me that there hadn't stopped being work to do when I tried to ask him some questions.

This was wrong, this was all wrong. I slouched back through Greimplatz with the rough yellow paper crumpled and unread in my fist. My knuckles were white on the dark metal of my new lantern-pole.

Two fellow lamplighters, my friends, were lying in the sawbones' rooms behind the Red Pile leaking into their bandages. Two more were dead and waiting in line for the firepit.

Nothing about the Greimplatz was what it should have been. I wondered why I hadn't noticed before. It wasn't just the quiet or the wary sullenness any more, either. By the time I was halfway back across the 'platz I was noticing it was about me.

Jancy was still nowhere to be seen. The fire-jugglers who performed for travellers coming off the Highborn Road had nobody now to laugh and toss trinkets at their tumbles, so they sat around a little vapour-burner and watched me instead. I heard someone spit after me as I passed. The bruisers outside the highbrow dens at the top end of the 'platz folded their arms and eyed me, and as I hooked onto the Brotherhoods' Alley a travelling card-player I vaguely knew murmured 'Who're you watching for them, Kass?' before he ghosted by and disappeared in the crowd. I could feel people's eyes on me. I was used to recognition or greetings, but this was a different feeling, hostile and clammy on my skin. I forced the hunch out of my shoulders, straightened my hat, tugged my coat square and went up the crooked steps to the Gunnery as fast as dignity would let me.

The flophair was nowhere in sight. Tovick was hunkered down by the far wall with a dirty sheet of canvas spread in front of him. Half a dozen weapons, bashed and dirty enough to be scavy cast-offs, were laid out on it and Drengeoff the poacher



had dumped himself down cross-legged opposite. He grinned as I walked up, his greasy beard folding up on itself and a half-dozen glints of yellow tooth showing through.

'Had a good haul, Kass! Took some work. Bloody dangerous game, ours, innit?' Drengoff liked to pretend he was some kind of free-roaming man of action, wandering around among the gangs and the bounty hunters, battling the scum of the Underhive for his plunder. It wasn't much of a secret that he spent most of his time holed up along the Tarvo trail with a flask of rotgut, tailing gangs at discreet distances, waiting for a fight where something valuable might get dropped. There weren't too many times when I'd take his company over the more respectable folks in Junktion. I must have been more rattled than I thought, because I sat down on a crate next to him.

'Dropped in on another fight, Drengoff?' It was the closest I cared to come to humouring him.

'Lot of it around now, Kass,' he told me happily. 'Lot of people coming further in. Getting closer to Junktion than I ever seen 'em. Wan't just us who lost our water, was it now?' I managed a nod.

Three and a half for the lot of those, Dreng,' Tovick put in. 'And don't try haggling me up, they're going straight in my salvage bin. And I'm not taking those cleavers, either. Try them on Cappitt at the foundry yard, he might give you a fifth of a chip or so for melting. Kass?' He tossed me the cell for my pistol, a point of green light winking to show it was juiced.

Tovick?' I said and tilted my head. We moved down the

counter a way, leaving Drengoff scowling at his salvage and probably trying to calculate how much booze it would buy him.

'What have you heard?' I kept my voice down. What's been going around about the lamplighters that hasn't reached me?' He looked at me for a long moment.

'Word came around before last lightsout that you were doing more than just keeping the lamps. The runt was full of the news. He said everyone knew you lot were going to start being the fathers' eyes and ears if you weren't already' He shrugged under my stare. 'Don't suppose it was so hard to believe. You're all over the place, all the time, and there's not a lot of love for the fathers since the water rations got tightened. They're charging more for what they do give out, too. I know you don't-' he caught himself, 'I know it doesn't affect you quite so much, but it's happening. There's less to go around all the time and nobody knows where the replacements are coming from.' I thought back on what Yonni had told me and clamped my teeth down on the inside of my cheek.

'Someone in the bunkerhouse said that the water-tithes they're collecting to let people in the gates are going straight to the fathers' private stashes, not to anywhere the rest of us are going to be able to buy it for any amount of money, and I hear tell some of the fathers have been bringing gangers through the gates these last couple of lightsons. You know anything about that?'

'I just do my job. Is all.' It was the best I could manage, and it left a rotten taste in my mouth. But what else could I tell him?

From the way Tovick grunted and walked back to Drengoff I

knew I'd blown something, missed some kind of chance. I was trying to think of more to say as Tovick flipped a pair of Guilder chips down onto the cloth. They disappeared into a chubby, grubby hand as the old poacher started talking to me again.

'What've you got, Kass? Got your rounds, hey? Yeah, dangerous out there, y'know.' I fought off a chill.

'So how about you, Drengoff? What is it you've heard about us?' His look turned suspicious.

'About you?' He was scanning my face and Tovick's for a clue, wanting to say whatever we wanted to hear. Tovick snorted and gathered up the ironmongery he'd paid for, and I put on my card-playing face.

'Trouble about, is all I'm saying,' he said after a moment. 'Gotta watch your back in places you used to be safe. Man can't afford to keep his hand off his holster. Outlying towns are running out o' water faster than we all are. Not just the people, either.' He caught on. You going outside the walls today, Kass?'

'Um.' I blinked, and uncrumpled the yellow sheet I still had in my hand. 'Yes. A set of stabbers by the gate and a half-dozen stringlights out along the Tarvo trail.' My mouth was a half-step ahead of my brain again. Broadcasting your route. Smart, Kass. But if Drengoff was itching to run outside and sell me out he didn't show it. He looked down at the chips in his fist and nodded.

'Mind how you go, Kass,' was all he said.

Junktion was going to spend that lightson in gloom. The big arclights had come on from their central switch but there was only me to work the smaller streets and alleys and there was no way to cover the whole town. The thought gave me a stab of unusual, spiteful satisfaction. If the ungrateful bastards were going to attack their lamplighters they could see how well they got on with only one in a dozen lamps started up for lightson. I was nursing that sour thought when I left the town in shadow and arrived at the sixward gate. I was looking forward to getting some honest work under my hands, but if the Peelgut gate had been bad last lightson then this was worse.

Even fifty paces out I could hear desperate shouts from the crowd outside and the answering roars of the guards, pitched lower to intimidate and command the way the bosses taught them. As I got closer, individual sounds emerged from the soup of noise, shouts of pain mixed in with the anger and the bitter pleading. The clank of the gate as a handful of skinny figures were allowed through. The cries of children. The chill was back in me.

Over the gate hot yellow-white stablights rode a thick metal rail along the parapet, ready to throw good hard light right out across the rubble-littered dome floor and the Tarvo trail. Bright enough to blind rushing attackers and turn the approach into a shooting gallery for the wall guards. The sixward gate stablights were the last thing many a scawy or bandit had ever seen.

The three central stabbers were out. The end ones still

worked, and in the backwash of light I could see the gate guards swinging them back and forth, directing the attention of the bruisers below. Even of those, a couple were starting to flicker and stutter in a way that would blow them if it weren't evened out, and if that happened they'd take hours to cool enough for me to work on them. The gate lights were Venz's particular babies, but I knew enough about them to be able to fix this.

I was halfway up the gatehouse ladder before I took a proper look at the guards and stopped dead.

'Hello down there, little man in a hat,' came the voice at the top of the ladder. A threefold shine in the glow of the gate-lights: metal-plated boots, bright chains wrapping the body and arms, aimless glossy blotches across the shorn scalp.

'What a hat that is,' said the Goliath gangman. Well done for you, carrying that hat. Must be a heavy hat for a little man.' He stood a little back and let me come up the ladder, then grabbed my wrist without warning me and dragged me half-upright onto the catwalk. If anything he was half a head shorter than little-man me, but House Goliath measures a man by brawn, and although my hands have long fingers I doubt I could have made them meet around his upper arms. Or his neck. He grinned at me. About a third of his teeth were missing, the gums scarred. I guessed that at some point he'd had a half-arsed try at putting metal teeth in and botched it. Very few of the Underhive docs know the trick of that, but plenty of people still try.

I looked up from his teeth, avoided his eyes, and realised

the shiny patches on his head weren't sickness-marks but tattoos, blotches of gunmetal ink across the skin.

'Steelheads!' he rumbled happily at me when he saw me looking, and smacked his palm against his head. 'Meet your new watch gang, little man, House Goliath's finest laying down the law for little Junktion.'

I'm told that 'little' is about the worst insult that one Goliath can use to another. When they come to the Underhive to form gangs and seek their fortunes they use it on the rest of us a lot.

Tovick had mentioned gangers being brought in and I'd thought little of it. The Berserkers or the Curse, maybe the Razors or the Snaptooths. One of the gangs you could do business with. But the Steelheads! With their reputation! Who'd done this?

It took a gunshot, a burst of screaming from below and three more seconds of the Steelhead's grin for me to decide that this was not the time to try and get briefed.

'Lampighter!' I shouted over the racket. 'Here for those stablights! They need to work now!' I was straining to be heard, although the Steelhead hadn't seemed to raise his voice. There must have been quite a pair of lungs in that barrel chest. He made a show of bowing and motioning me along the parapet, grinning all the while. There were half a dozen Steelheads on there with me, all smirking, posing, looking down their noses at the crowd outside the gate and hefting their weapons.

The work was easy, but they made it hard. The joiner box

that spread the juice out among the lamps had been kicked in against the wall by someone who'd wanted a clearer footing, and now one side had popped its seals and was letting the juice spark and choke. I scowled at the Steelheads' metal-banded boots clanking up and down the catwalk and decided it was a blind miracle that the juice hadn't hit the metal already and cooked the whole lot of them. A lamplighter sees that kind of thing happen every so often.

Re-dipping the box was no great task and I had a cleaner, undamaged joiner collar in my pack. By the time I'd got it out I'd had one Steelhead non-accidentally bounce a knee off my ribs as I crouched down, and barely got my fingers out from under the non-accidental boot of another. They watched me and guffawed to each other, and didn't even seem to care when I pulled the power to rejoin the leads.

The crowd did, though. Without the stablights' glare they could see me - the parapet wasn't that high, and the shouts were the same as at the liftport gate.

'Lamplighter! Let us in! Talk to them!'

'You! I've seen you, always around! You give me safe conduct in there! You won't regret it! Won't regret it unless I catch you out on the trails alone, you ratfaced little sack! Let me in!'

'Please, you have to tell these people, tell them I have enough water for them, it's just it's in my holestead, if I can just come in and eat before I go for it...'

Except one.

'Kass! I know you! Sinden Kass! We met up on the trails! It's Enning! You remember me, don't act like you don't! My brothers are through, they're in Junktion, they're in there with their families, can you at least get word to them? Talk to them, Kass, their names-'

But by then too many others had heard my name and taken up the chorus. I finished fixing the box in a frantic scramble, cursing, hair in my face. All I want is to do my job, I kept telling them in a voice so low I could barely hear it myself. That's all. I had no clout with the gate guards and the water-tithe wasn't my idea. Even in Junktion it was running out, why didn't they try their luck up or down-Hive where there might be more? It wasn't my problem.

Even after the stablights came on and the bruisers and gunners drove the mob back, even after three Steelheads escorted me out of the gate and marched me toward the Tarvo trail, those still seemed to be the only words I could say.

I can't do anything. I can't give you what you want. It's not my problem. It's not my job.

I walked away.



# 4: THE RATHOLE

The Steelheads waited through the first job, a trivial little wiring correction for a crossroads stalk-lamp, and then they leered, gave me a clap on the shoulder that turned into a non-accidental shove, and swaggered back toward Junktion without a word. I stood in the stalk-lamp's glow and looked around.

The crossroads sat in a tall chamber of stained grey rockcrete. Above me the ceiling buttress was festooned with the bodies of scavies and outlaws strung up by the Junktion watch. (The real Junktion watch, I corrected myself. The Steelheads! I didn't want to think about it.) Ahead a tunnel turned left to meet the Shining Falls rampway before it picked its way through three or four ragged old supporting walls and met the jagged little alley under the liftport and joined the roadpipe for Ghoul Bend. Three more trails zigzagged off through the equally decaying old habplexes to the right. One dropped a level, doubled back on itself and led into the gauntlet of deadfalls and lookouts that protected the fungus and slime farms at Peelgut. The second curved away in the other direction and climbed three levels, opening into a flat table of empty badlands, old manufactories full of foul-smelling metal-dust and leaking tox pipes.

The third was the trail out to Tarvo, lit and patrolled courtesy of Junktion and of the Berserkers, the Orlock gang who'd made Tarvo their own. I took a deep breath and a glance at

the half-ruined walkway buttress above me, littered with corpses, and I started walking.

Work, that was what I needed, good back-bending mind-clearing work to get it all out of my mind. All this trouble had proved my point. In the Underhive it doesn't pay to get attached to people. You need to be able to just turn and walk away. Walk away from the water-rioters. Or the bodies of the other lamplighters. Or the town where you'll never see your mother and sister again, or the holestead where your father is...

I shook my head to clear it. This was what happened when you let things get to you. I stared ahead instead.

I knew a shortcut that would keep me off the main trail, and going by the scene at the gate staying off the trail was a good idea. I didn't want to meet another mob intent on getting into Junktion, not with my escorts gone. I remembered Drengoff's words about trouble brewing out here, and then I ignored them. Who was I going to believe? Him or the bodies hanging over the crossroad? Junktion had cleaned its badlands out. It was famous for it. Hell, I was part of that fame myself. Nobody knew any other town that had ever hired people like me to get the old Hive lighting grids running again, although plenty of places were trying to copy us now. Bright light so the vermin couldn't hide and the bandits couldn't lurk. Junktion and its lamplighters.

Junktion and its lamplighter. Singular. Me. I steered my thoughts away again.

Work. Something for my hands to do. I was a third of the

way along the trail now, a stretch that used to be some kind of high-roofed access tunnel for hab-levels abandoned who knew how long ago. The lighting was good, a working lamp about every dozen paces, and I was making good time. I wasn't quite used to walking with the pole and the two-tone and experimented with some different ways. Pole this hand, gun that shoulder, pack and ladder... no. Pole and gun here, pack lower and around toward the hip more? I got about three steps before I realised it was all about to drop on the ground. This was good, this was distracting. This was my job.

I had found a setup I liked, pole and pack on the same side and the two-tone slung low, and I was adjusting some straps and the tilt of my hat to accommodate it better when I saw the arm and stopped like a statue.

It was an adult's arm. Maybe. The skin was grey like a scratchgrub shell and flaccid with rot, and the flesh was missing off two of the fingers. Two of the six fingers. The thumb was longer than any of those fingers, and all of them had odd, angular joints. I took a slow step closer. The fleshless fingers looked gnawed and the bone had been cracked to get at the marrow. The nails were crusted with something dark. Everyone knew scavvies would eat their own kind if they couldn't chase down cleanskin folks.

I breathed hard and dropped my pack to get the two-tone into my hands. The arm-stump had been dragged back and forth across the rough floor, leaving a congealed mark. Had it been an attempt to write something, paint something? I couldn't tell. I listened hard but couldn't hear any sounds.

New arrangement. Pack on back with my lantern-pole jammed down through the straps, uncomfortable as a bastard but it left both hands free for the two-tone.

Safe than sorry and all the rest of it. I scowled at the arm, as if I could intimidate it in revenge for unnerving me, and set off again, playing a nasty game of question-response in my head.

If there were scavy troubles then surely the fathers would have tried to root them out?

Sure they would, it wasn't as though things were so stretched in Junktion that they'd had to rope a gang of House Goliath thugs into the Watch, or anything.

But there was that much activity on the trails into Junktion that somebody would have come across them and raised the alarm?

That's right, an alarm that would have cut right through all the shouting and crying at the gate, and we knew for sure that any trail-slogging holesteaders who blundered into a scavy ambush would survive to raise the alarm.

Ha! I told myself as the tunnel right-angled and pitched upwards over a long-settled rockfall into which some conscientious soul had cut steps years ago. Ha! Anyone they ran into almost certainly got away, though. Scavies don't turn on one another unless they're really hungry.

Everyone knows that, I told myself back as I picked my way down the far side of the slope, which is what pretty much guarantees that any scavies still lurking around here will be really hungry.

While I stood and thought about that, there was a noise from behind me. Light and distant, maybe nothing more than a little rockfall or some little underhive vermin, but it was enough for my instinct to make my decision for me: I moved on again.

The steps down on this side of the fall led down a long way past the tunnel's original level, down to stepping stones over an eye-smarting chemical bog. About a hundred paces later it started climbing again, toward the Tarvo trail. I was out of the chem-stink in short order and moving more easily up the gentler passageway, through level on level of crumbling, interwoven passages. I was trying to move and breathe as softly as possible, listening for any more of those stealthy little sounds behind me. I knew for a fact that nerves were fuelling my imagination, but did that mean that my imagination was all it was? There were no more scavy traces littering the floor now: the only marks I saw were the carefully cut and painted signs marking the way to the Tarvo trail, which was fine by me.

It was putting me in a more optimistic mood, too, and I asked myself again: was it not true that I had spent a large chunk of my life pre-Junktion on the move through country just like this, and come off none the worse (and rather the richer and craftier) for it?

Of course, I replied, and that was because I had the good sense to always travel with a big caravan and never piss off down an empty trail on my own.

There was another rattling of loose rock from behind me. Not a scavy, but not my imagination either.

I was gripping the two-tone tight enough to make my fingers

ache. I had found my distraction, well and good, but now I needed a distraction from my distraction. I almost scuttled into the chimney at the top of the trail and hauled myself one-handed up the ladder, into the distinctive green tinge of the Tarvo trail's stringlights. I backed away from the top of the ladder with the two-tone trained on it, until my heart had slowed and I was sure there was nothing coming up it. It had been a long while since I had been that glad that a leg of my rounds was over.

\* \* \*

The greenish stringlights made the Tarvo trail one of the brightest, and so safest, but they gobbled juice like an absolute bastard. The trail depended on a fat juice cable that the Berserkers had taken off their neighbours the Exers, a gang of House Van Saar renegades. After three lightsons of the vicious little turf-war the sole surviving Exer had legged it along the Chamberpit trail minus an eye and most of his gear and hadn't been seen since. Now the Berserkers rented it to Tarvo, and Tarvo cut a deal with Junktion, and here I was working for any or all of them, as far as I could tell or be bothered to think about it.

I'm good at powertaps, picked up a knack for them setting up camps in my travelling days. Finding the arm had still left me nervous, but after I saw lights moving around on the bridge

(the Berserkers would never relinquish their toll station there, water shortage or no) I got more confident. This was a good spot, kept in good hands. The Berserkers were one of the toughest gangs this side of Coma Gulch. I'd been jumping at shadows.

The thought cheered me up as I panned my lamp around. Someone, probably Thamm, had got too extravagant with the lights near the bridge over the Dredge Canal, and there just wasn't enough juice off the existing powertap to run them all. The existing tap was more or less sound despite some bodged connections (definitely Thamm, I couldn't touch her on fine component work but her cabling was atrocious), but it needed a backup. No problem.

I managed to follow Thamm's tap-cable away from the trail and through a broad crack in the rockcrete wall that enclosed one side of the trail. That led to a bit of swearing - Thamm hates it when I set stuff too high for her to reach and I hate it when she puts it places too small for me to fit. I was just working out a way to get my body and pack through the crack when I heard the voices behind me, at the head of the ladder I'd climbed up. It took me a moment to realise what they were saying, and then I froze in place.

'What do you mean you can't see him? How would he have got back past us, then?'

'Maybe he legged it down to the bridge. I swear he heard us. 'S'why he was so quiet when he came up, was covering behind him.'

Then why don't we just keep talking like idiots and give

ourselves away?' hissed the first voice. 'Let's move it and find him before he gets to the bridge, if that's where he's going. I don't want to get into Berserker gun sights. You heard Heliko at lightson, no trouble with the gangs 'til we've done with Junktion.'

I'd been right. They'd been following me. More lamplighter-hunters.

If they were afraid I was still lying in wait for them, fine. That was a dandy head start. There was no way I could make it past them and down to the Dredge Canal bridge, but thanks to Thamm's cable I knew this burrow would come out somewhere. Fear helped me wrench myself through the gap, hook my pack with my lantern-pole and drag it after me, and now I was inside the double thickness of wall.

No good, not yet. If they'd heard me and I stayed in here I was trapped and dead meat. I took a breath and then followed Thamm's cable through the cavity and out through another great crack.

Passing through a wall or hatch is often the cue for a shocking change in Underhive scenery. Suddenly I was between two giant hab-stacks, balancing on a swaying duct barely wider than I was over a dark gap that went a long way down. But that was where the cable went, and that meant it was where escape was, so with clipline and pole-hook I worked my way across and into a second cavity between another pair of double walls. From wall to wall there was barely enough room for me to extend one arm and even that narrow space was full. My lamp shone off vents and ducts and



shafts, silver splotched with old rust, and my boots were sinking into the usual floor coating that the out-of-the-way nooks of the Underhive pick up. Dust, silt, metal scraps, trash, little bones bound together with old spider webs or small papery scraps of skin.

I unhooked my clip line and clicked off my lantern, stayed still and quiet. For a moment I fancied I heard voices back on the other side of the chasm I'd just crossed, and I wondered what the hell I'd been thinking coming out here without a guard.

I hadn't been thinking anything. I'd been too relieved to be out of the gate and away from the Steelheads and I'd wandered off without thinking the way I was so used to doing. And what was I supposed to have done, ask the Steelheads to stay with me? Well, maybe I should have swallowed my pride. I ground my teeth and decided not to think about that. If it had been voices on the other side of that giant gap, they weren't there now. I made myself stay quiet and listen for a count of a hundred and fifty before I decided I could risk flicking my lamp on.

I took my bearings. Thamm's tap would be connecting with the master cable below where I stood, and I was pretty sure I could fit in another one. I was also forming a good idea of where I was relative to a parts stash we kept behind a-

Venomous black eyes in the light of the filament lamp, yellow dagger-teeth in a snarl. I yelled. My hands went for the two-tone and sure they got it, but then the rim of the lamp cracked against the rockcrete and it began to flicker and my

lantern-pole went over with a crash behind me.

Not the dark, not now.

No.

For a heartbeat a quick white muzzle-flash from the two-tone scorched away the dark. It could only have been a couple of seconds since I had seen that face and my hands on the gun still remembered where it had been.

I hit where it had been but not where it was. The rat, long as my forearm, thicker than my thigh, was already coming at me and my burst killed the one behind it.

My boot was powering forward by the remembered light of the gun-flare and crunched high into the thing's snarling face. By reflex I shifted my weight forward and pinned it on its back. Its hissing squeal sounded almost like words. I kept my weight down until I heard its back break and back-pedalled, shuffling my foot around until it hit the lantern pole.

I'd seen more rats in the flare, eyes and teeth and bone-spines and claws. The Underhive twists rats the same as humans, only worse. Feet skittered in front of me and I risked a breath-quick burst down where the noises were loudest, then bent and snatched for the lantern.

Never crouch when you're fighting Underhive rats. It brings your vitals down to where they don't need to climb or leap to tear at them. I got the pole into the crook of an elbow and the glow-rod in the lantern came up again as I dragged it out of the dust, strong and bright, thank Helmawr.

The sudden change in light gave the rats pause and I used

it, put a foot back behind me and burned off half the two-tone's ammo, sending the leading rats back to land in the spray from their own exit wounds. That stalled them again and I backed up another step, darting lizard-quick glances at sides and back. Underhive rats are smart enough for pincers and ambushes, oh yes.

I needed to get out of this coffin of a double-wall, that or get out my pistol. The two-tone would need a reload in a moment, if I didn't wing myself with a ricochet in this death-box. I realised that more and more of what my feet were crunching in was bone. Gnawed bones.

I ducked my head through the sling of the two-tone and let it hang as the rats seethed and shifted on their feet. Most were big as a human baby, naked tails longer than my arm. The one nearest had nests of sharp quills framing its head. The next had hooked bone thorns growing out of a row of sores down its spine. At least two had extra pairs of legs and ran low to the ground like spiders. They stared at me and chattered. Had I scared them with the kills I'd made, or were they... around the bodies... were they drinking?

My head banged against a shaft and I yelped, ducked, danced forward and away from anything that was standing on the metal and level with my face. The rats came on again as soon as my concentration was split. The boil of mangy backs crawled with parasites.

I didn't dare try and duck under the shaft, not without knowing what was beyond it. Trapped hunched over in a dead end I'd not live a minute. Zakzakzak and my pistol scorched

the air in front of me, took the life out of two rats. The rest didn't slow. I crouched for a terrifying moment, shed my tool pack then jumped, kicked out and hung there, wedged by feet and shoulders between the filthy walls.

A rat leapt out of the mass and managed to punch its teeth through the hem of my coat. It swung there for a moment and nearly dragged me down before I managed a convulsive jerk that let me twist and shoot into its belly. Its dead jaws sagged open and it fell back into the mass. Another rat leapt for my outstretched pistol arm and I pulled it back with an effort. I was sweating: body heat and the las-shots had upped the temperature in this little cavity of hell. My nose was full of the stink of vermin breath and las-scorched rat-hair. Sin-den Kass, Junktion's last lamplighter, rat-bait in a cavity he didn't have the sense not to scurry into.

I shut my eyes and tried to breathe, but the crook in my body and the stink made my lungs hitch. Do not cough. Then I looked over at the shaft I'd hit my head on moments before. Ventilator, it looked like, for air or smoke or whatever the hell. But built how strong?

How long could I stay wedged here like this? A minute more? Two? If that. No choice.

I shuffled a foot sideways, another, wedged my elbows and worked my arms and my shoulders. Rockcrete grated me through my coat. This was stupid, this whole thing was stupid. How could it take my weight if-

No. No panic. I gritted my teeth, reached over and shot the head off a two-foot-long rat that had reared up on top of my

pack with one of the straps snagged in its forelegs. It had had a tongue longer than my finger and tipped with a sucker.

There. Who's still on top? I shifted further. One of my elbows slid and I nearly lost the lantern-pole. My chest was cramped and I wheezed for air. My hair was plastered to my face. There were screams below me as the rats fought to climb the walls.

Don't think about them. If they could get this high they would have. I fired a random shot downward. Another scream. That was me. Sinden Kass, Ratkiller, their god, perched high above their little Underhive dealing death on my whim. Fear me.

I muttered this self-anaesthetising rubbish while I ignored the burning in my muscles and moved, moved. Nearly there, don't blow it, lunge too soon and you're down there in amongst-

Clank. I got the lantern-pole onto the flat top of the shaft and was able to let go. Free hand! I twisted to get both feet planted, right shoulder and the right side of my face ground into the wall, then put my left hand flat on the wall in front of my face and pushed myself into an arch, facing down. All I could see under me was heaving hair shot through with pink tail and white bone. I shot another one to boost my spirits then walked feet, shoulder and hand along the walls until I was over the duct.

Moment of truth. I let one leg down to test the duct, but then my own strength ran out and I crashed down full length onto the top of the shaft.

It held. The top bowed in and boomed and creaked but it

bloody held.

Underneath me the rats went wild, boiling and spasming with hunger and rage, leaping from the top of my pack and snapping the air, thumping against each other and the walls.

The metal of the duct began to give way.

There was a thin screech from by my head as the mounting gave, then the whole duct deformed and started to crumple. The rats stayed under me, rearing and scrabbling and pawing the air, and then a new sound, a new realisation. I could hear the sound of rat-feet in the duct, feel the vibrations of claw and rasping tail in the metal under my cheek. They were coming up here.

Think. There was another duct above me, but it was too high to reach for and most of it hung in a rusted slump. I could dimly see one beyond and below me, but I'd have to stand and leap to it and there wasn't (another shearing grate from the metal underneath me) time.

I pressed the hot muzzle of my pistol into the back of my hand and cleared my thoughts. No panic. I gripped my lantern-pole in the same instant the duct gave way.

I planted the end of the pole on the floor below, and doubled over the top end of it as though I were one of Bull Gorg's freedom-fighters, impaled on a spike outside Dead End like you hear in the stories. For a moment I knew I was dead, knew it so completely as to even resent the formality of having to live through being eaten after I fell to the floor. Then the pole turned my fall into a clumsy curve that crashed me into the lower duct. I hugged it as tight as I've ever hugged a woman, coating my

front in rust and white grime, worked my way on top of it and lay there, panting in the dimness as the duct I'd been lying on finally collapsed to the floor with a clamour that drowned out the screams of the rats.

While rat-voices rustled and snickered under me, I felt the comforting angles of the two-tone against my chest, then craned over and looked down. The lantern was still glowing up from the layer of floor-trash it had landed in, half-hidden by the shattered curve of something's skull, every so often eclipsed as a heavy body scampered across it.

I sat up on the new duct. This one did not give, but the top was cambered and the curve made me slow and cautious as I lifted the lantern-pole and took stock. I spared a wince for my poor tool pack, down there getting gnawed on and tunnelled into, filled with infected fleas and reeking crap. But better it than me.

There was a way out. There had to be, because Thamm had run a cable tap in here and it needed to get out the far side. I clamped the pole between my knees and dug a new magazine for the two-tone off my belt. I stowed the old one - forgetting about it and letting it fall was the sort of thing I'd do if I weren't careful - and I was about to load the replacement clip when the rat, a lean grey bastard with teeth as straight and narrow as needles - dropped out of the darkness above me, missed my knee by a fingers breadth, caromed off the side of the duct and squalled angrily as it fell.

Stupid, stupid. If they knew a way into the old duct, why wouldn't they know a way into this one? I whacked my hat off

my head and onto my back to hang by its thong. You don't see too many broad brimmed hats in the Underhive. A hood or a bowl helmet will keep off the dust and tox rains without stopping you seeing a high-set attacker. Underhive turf is three-dimensional. Wide brims are a hazard, a luxury, an advertisement, a vanity statement. You'd think I'd know better, wouldn't you?

Two more rats landed. I straightened up as much as I dared and whipped the first one over the side of the duct with my lantern-pole, but then the lantern end scraped the wall behind me and toppled me forward. I got my footing, but not before the rat had got my foot. Smart or no, it took seconds to work out that its teeth weren't biting through to my toes - when did I say the Goliaths were the only ones around with metal-shod boots? - and that was enough for me to load the two-tone and take away everything between its ears and its shoulders with one careful round.

I flapped for balance for a moment before I caught myself, crouched and drew my las. The two-tone's recoil was light, but enough to cause problems on the curving metal that I didn't need. The next rat landed, scabbled, snarled and lost its face to a las-round. So did the next, and the one after that took a kick. When an Underhive rat is coming in low for your knee or your hamstrings, kick higher than lower: better to be ready to stamp or pin the thing if you don't kill it first off than have it grip your foot and be placed to bite your instep.

I booted the twitching body off the duct and shot the next, a mangy brown with vestigial eyes in its shoulders that stared



blindly up at me. But the next one must have run to jump, and it came arcing out further and hit me in the chest. For a terrible instant it was clinging to me, its claws scratching and its snout under my chin, and then I'd torn it loose. When I tried to throw it away it twisted and got a mouthful of coat sleeve, and I could feel wetness on my front and palm where claws and quill-spines had pricked the skin.

The writhing thing on the end of my arm took my balance, and I staggered into the air for a moment. The next rat came down at the same angle and hit my stomach, and the terror of it biting at my innards saw me pump half a dozen las-shots into it. It spasmed and fell smoking as I toppled off the duct, landing on my back, my arms dragging down the walls when I tried to throw them out.

The sickly-grey thing on the end of my arm growled and worried at my coat-cuff, trying to unsnag its teeth from the cloth, and then the rest were abandoning the tool pack and rushing me, the last few dropping down out of the wall and bouncing to their feet with their eyes already fixed on my throat. I was yelling, trying to regain my feet, firing the pistol wildly, holding them back with sheer volume as the floor-litter in front of their noses began to smoulder and catch from the shots. The rat on my cuff yowled and scratched until I got enough wits back to jam the pistol against the side of its jaw and blow its head off.

Flames were licking up from the trash in front of me. Not much, but the smoke and little glow was enough to buy me a moment. I kept low and scabbled further back. I wondered

what filth and parasites I was putting my cut and opened hands in. Question for another time. If I died a sick man tomorrow I wouldn't die an eaten man today. I risked a look behind me and-

And there was smoke coming from behind me too. Smoke and light. There was flickering light coming from a cavity low in the rockcrete. I heard a voice. I knew I heard a voice.

'Out! I'm coming out! Lamplighter, I'm a lamplighter!' I didn't care how my voice sounded. I was bleeding and hunted and low on ammo - the amber telltale was winking on the back of my laspistol. I wrenched my body around and through the cavity, nearly strangling myself in the sling for the two-tone before I writhed it free and kept going. I was ready to take it apart with my teeth if that was what it took.

I lay on my back on bare metal, eyes squeezed shut, gulping air. In between gulps I got as far as 'Believe me, people, am I glad-'

Then hands hoisted me up. They were not gentle. They were big, powerful, bony, and they grabbed my hair and tilted my head back.

The first face I opened my eyes to was drooped and sagging. The eyes were two wet red holes rimmed in scabs. The top lip was curled up and atrophied and the gum underneath it was green and toothless.

'Got gear!' it said. The deformed mouth made it snuffle the words. Rolling my eyes desperately from side to side I could see more faces start to echo the words. Sacred red pissing redeemer, but what faces. Grey flesh, yellow flesh, waxy-white

flesh. Eyes deep set, eyes in repellent glistening clusters, eyes missing or pulsing under veiny skin. Atrophied features, sores like craters, mouths like wounds, mouths like suckers, mouths like muzzles, missing teeth, tusk teeth, horns, trunks, throat sacs. The giant hand that held the front of my coat was ridged with dark green scales.

'Got gear,' said the saggy face thoughtfully, and then split in a grin. 'Got gear, got meat!' It started shouting, the whole rubbery face jolting, the scabs around its eyes cracking and weeping.

'Got gear got meat! Got gear got meat!'

The scavies had found me.

# 5: GOT GEAR, GOT MEAT

Got gear, got meat. No guesses about which of those terrified me more.

They had lashed my wrists together and wrapped something moist around my head. Hide or gut, from the way it filled my lungs with reek every time I took in breath. I was trying to work my face to wriggle the wrappings so I could see. Well, I could if it actually spitting worked. I didn't know which of the filthy scavies had bound my head, but he had tightened them too much around my eyes and the only way to make a gap over my mouth would have been to poke the wrappings with my tongue. Licking that half-cured mess was a bad enough thought, but worse was the incredible urge to vomit that the thought brought on. I actually began to dry-heave, flopping my body and gasping against the wrappings, before I gritted my teeth and controlled myself.

I had no idea where we were. They had punched me into a daze when they bound me and I didn't know how long it had taken to hang onto one of my little passing patches of consciousness and stay awake. I'd been draped over the back of the big spitter who'd grabbed me as I crawled out of the rathole, draped like a cloak with my wrists crossed and bound in front of his neck.

Fight free? A laugh. I tried crooking my leg to see if I could still feel the knife in my boot, but I couldn't get my leg into a position to find out. I was brave or stupid enough - too woozy

to decide which at that stage - to try doubling up to try and knee the scaly in the back, maybe bruise his kidneys or something, but the couple of good licks I did get in fetched up against the plates and ridges over his hide.

We stopped. I swung by numb arms as he grunted out a message. A couple of grunts in return in that yipping scavy doggerel. Then my ride threw himself backward and slammed me into the sharp edges of an I-beam. I yelled, and again as I got squashed. Jagged scales drove into my chest and gut and the rough steel of the beam into my back. Each time I cried out there were happy yawps and guffaws from all around until another voice cut in, a sharper, rougher voice, snapping and hounding them into getting moving again. After that I kept my movements small and sly, trying to get into a posture that wouldn't wrench my arms. Maybe if he didn't feel me moving he'd think I'd blacked out again. It was the only thing I could think of that remotely resembled an edge.

Scalies. That's what they're called, the big mutants that sometimes run with the scavy mobs. Way down at Hive bottom, in the hellish waste-layers where the poisons are so thick nothing clean can live, that's where they keep themselves to themselves unless the scavies can lure them up to fight. Yonni said he'd hunted them down around Lost Hope in his younger days. Said the Scalies had found their balance with the toxins that warp you and find their way through to your children so your grandchildren are nothing you can recognise. They hail become their own thing down in the chem-siinips and the dark. I'd shivered at the idea. Junktion was as far down as I ever wanted to go-

We stopped again, and I was dumped down hard to lie in the dust. I lay and tried to get my breath. I'd be prouder to say I was already thinking about freeing my hands, or getting my legs under me and at least go out resisting. Instead my thoughts ran in all directions like the rats in that double wall where maybe I would have been better off dying. Rats didn't flay and roast their meals alive for laughs.

I wondered miserably why I hadn't smelled a cooking fire or felt a knife yet. They had to be hungry. I remembered the arm I'd seen in the Tarvo trail. They'd already been hungry enough to eat at least one of their own. Surely they would need to eat more than some bony-arsed scavvy? But nobody had taken so much as a nibble at me. Maybe I was someone's personal property and too precious to hurt. For the moment.

I lay there in the dark of the wrappings for maybe another hour before I discovered that was right, more or less.

'This.'

I was breathing the dusty-mould smell of the scaly because its arms were wrapped around me, like a father bear-hugging a child who's thrown a fit. With the wrappings off, the free breath was enough to make me giddy.

'This.' I'd thought that the scab-eyed thing I'd seen outside the rat-hole was the boss, but no. When the thing in front of me moved there was an expectant hush. Each time it spoke there was a murmur as the other scavies muttered its words over again.

We were in a room like nothing I recognised from any rounds I'd made near Junktion, inward-sloping walls meeting a seamed metal roof at just below head height. I could feel the scaly's chin digging into my scalp as he bent his big frame down to fit. There was almost no light, and I could hear the scavies around the walls better than I could see them.

The boss was lit by a swaying, pallid curtain of luminous fungus-strips knotted around the weapon he held across one shoulder. A heavy matchlock scattergun, the kind that scavies and Ratskins and outlaws use. His other hand held the two-tone, battered and scuffed, the sling-strap broken.

'This this-this?' Maybe it was the only proper word he knew, or maybe the crisscrossing scars that made his lips into flaps were messing up some other word.

You-this. Got-this.' He let it sink in, then: 'Me-this!'

It was the scavies' cue to set up a racket, screeching and stamping and banging weapons on the rockcrete floor. This wasn't a feast, it was a gloating session. The boss shook the two-tone at me and cackled, then dropped it (with a clatter that made me wince for my poor weapon) and hopped up and down. He had dressed for the occasion in a tattered spiderhide shawl, the hem stitched with teeth, knucklebones, vertebrae. Some of them looked human.

Ornaments rattling, he pranced among the scavies and returned dragging something through the dust behind him. Something that gleamed and clanked was shoved in my face, swinging forward to clout my chin.

'My lantern-pole', I said aloud. 'Mine. Put it down, or else.' Brave or stupid? Depended on how much it he understood. He seemed to pick up my tone though, because he leaned forward and grinned into my face. His nose had been entirely rotted away by an angry red infection that had spread up to his hairline: just a flap of wet cartilage jutted out at me. The boss waggled his tongue - I could see right through it where a sore had rotted a hole in the flesh - and then he retreated for something else. My eyes were adapting to the dark, and I could see that under the shawl he wore an insane crisscross of belts and bandoliers, threaded with hides and scalps.

He dragged the next trophy out of the murk. My tool pack. Torn by rat teeth and streaked with rat faeces, which stained the boss's arms as he rummaged in it.

'This-this!'

'It's a juice-talker. Tells you how much power is running down a cable. You don't need that, you can just grab the metal and cook yourself, how about that?'

'I-this-me-this-this!'

'That's poke-foam. Buying it new from uphive is expensive, but you can strip usable stuff out of old parts if you know how.' This was insane. Listen to this! Chatting to a scavy boss about the fine points of lamplighter kit! I wondered what Yonni would say about it.

'This. You-this.' There was a string of doggerel syllables that I didn't recognise. His tone was slyer.

'My filament lamp. Was a good one, too. Bought it myself



off a Guilder.' I'd queued on the jetty at Baiter's Dock while the skiff came in over the sludge lake. The man's golden Guild medallion had shone in the lamplight like nothing I'd ever seen. 'Good luck with it. It's broken. Broken worse than your face, and that's pretty bad, isn't it, you ugly rotted little rat?'

More doggerel. The boss turned to the others, held the lamp up, and then yipped and worked the catch with his thumb. Nothing, of course, the thing had broken in the rathole. The boss screeched and threw the thing away, really flung it, to nervous noises from the scavvies. I winced at the impact crunch. It had been a good lamp. The boss had obviously wanted to show off that he knew how to ignite it, wow the troops a bit. Well, if my little lamp's last art was to humiliate a scavvy then I guessed it was dying in a good cause.

The setback with the lamp had cut his momentum. He stamped his flat feet and banged the stock of his scattergun on the floor, then cracked it into the face of a random scavvy whom I could barely make out in the dark. The others tittered. Then he shuffled back and stared at me for a long time, until I decided that the show must be over. Feasting time. Bye bye Underhive. But he was getting ready for the grand finale. He lifted his last prize and flapped it hard enough to raise dustpuffs. My big broad-brimmed hat.

That punctured the shrill good humour I'd stumbled into, and I was suddenly furious. I loved that hat. It was my trademark So it was a vanity symbol. Screw it, I loved showing it off. My hat!

The boss knew he'd had a win straight away. He started capering again, carrying the hat around the ring and back in

front of me again, jamming it hard down onto his wispy-haired peeling head.

'This-this-this-yip-yark-get-got-I-me-scratt-me-this!' The scavies hooted and yelled back at him, and I found I still had a shout in me.

'Get that off, you thieving piece of carrion! Put it down, get your fingers off it you pus-skinned...' I trailed off. It wasn't because they were all watching me, although they were. It was because that popular Junktion insult was 'pus-skinned scavy', and I had suddenly wondered what was the point?

And that brought that ridiculous good mood back, a mood to laugh right up at death, and so I did, quivering in the scaly's hug with these great convulsions of laughter that even frightened me. But I couldn't stop laughing, even with the boss slapping and then punching my face again and again.

I was waiting for him to cut my throat - wasn't that next? Show me the stuff he'd taken, open me up ready for the pot. Well, there were worse ways to go out than laughing at the knife.

What did stop me was the scaly suddenly pitching me sideways. The crown of my head hit the sloping wall and I dropped on my face in the stale silt of the floor, too surprised to break my fall. I thought that the kicks would come next - they would to a scavy who got tossed down in the middle of a crowd of Junktioners - but it wasn't about me at all.

A new pair of scavies had come in behind the boss. I could just make out their shapes in the barely-there light from the boss' glow-fungus, ducking their heads like fighting rats

acknowledging an alpha male, chattering in doggerel. Their voices were pleading, warning, urgent.

Sklipp. Fitezz-sklip. Badzone doggerel for clean water, one of the few words of it I knew. Somehow the scavies had found clean water.

We moved. And I mean we. I was along for the ride, slung over the scaly's shoulders again, my back grating along the ceiling as he lumbered out. The scavies were yammering excitedly, weapons in their hands and bits of old meat and edible fungus stuffed into pants and belts. This hadn't been a nest or a camp, just a place to stop. These were true nomads. Nothing was being left behind, including me.

I was wondering if that was good or bad when I was thrown down and winded again. I writhed and whooped for breath as the scaly loomed down, his muzzled face in mine. I wondered if he were going to bite into my throat, with the meal all to himself now that the others were gone ahead.

Wrong guess. It was time for the wrappings again, just around my mouth this time, and then an extra length of gut binding my ankles. I tried to use the last of my bravado to insult the scaly but all I managed was a strangled gggmmgg through the gag. I lay over his shoulder furiously snorting what breath I could through my nostrils as he broke into a thudding run.

I'd been given a reprieve, and I was on fire with trying to work out how to use it. I started desperately counting the

doorways we ran past, ghostly patches of deeper black, then when we passed into darkness so total my eyes couldn't sift it I counted the scaly's long strides. I think I was at about fifty-eight when the light grew again and we started to climb.

We were climbing up what Junktion folk called a shamble. A pocket of Underhive, usually taller than it was wide, a tricky tangle of loose rubble, fallen girders, collapsed walls and floors, bursts of luminous fungi. The occasional intact wall or pylon or walkway jutted through in one direction or another. This shamble was dominated by a face of broken rockcrete, pitted and rich in handholds that the scaly quickly clambered up. The light got brighter as we climbed, soft fungus-glow. Fungi meant moisture, and I craned around looking for a sight or sound of it. Nothing showed itself and when we finally climbed past the fungi themselves they were thirsty and shrivelled, their bright orange ridges stained with dead brown.

High up in the shamble (how high I didn't know, but well after I'd closed my eyes rather than look down) we clawed off the climbing face and onto the stump of an old enclosed bridge. For a moment I entertained some half-baked plans to kick and writhe and tip the scaly's balance, tumbling us both back down, one last fightback, but we were on firm footing and loping up a sloping corridor before I could work up the courage. Probably wouldn't have been worth it anyway. I remembered Yonni's stories about how scalies could knit themselves new flesh, how once a scaly he knew he'd winged had waded into his next hunting party with no sign left of the bullet-hole. No point in sacrificing myself if he was just going to grow himself whole again, was there?

I was still muttering excuses like this as we crept forward through a dim, low walkway. Aisles of vertical metal girders marched alongside us, the paths between them choked with giant puffballs the yellow of old toenails and tethered with skimpy, glistening stalks. We moved through the puffball glades in sudden, unnerving silence: the yammering from the scavies had stopped and my breathing was the loudest sound I could hear.

The scaly dropped to all fours and dumped me. I rolled over to try and see what was going on and came face to face with the girl, lying full length on the ground next to me with her face turned and her eyes level with mine.

She was fairly young. Not more than sixteen, if she was young enough for youth to show in an Underhive that weathers people fast. She had light brown eyes, wide open, and the elaborate beaded braids of a House Escher gangwoman, dirty now from where she'd been dragged feet-first through the muck. Her nose was crooked from at least two old breaks and lashworm scars lined the side of her neck and shoulder. Her mouth was open but only a single tooth was missing. Bottom front. She wore typical scrappy gang armour: patches of meshmail or recycled ceramite plate strapped over her jacket and leggings. Her holsters and sword clip were empty.

She was quite dead, and her open eyes were blank and sightless. I could see the knot behind her ear where the club had landed, and the red puddle underneath her where a broken-off scavy knife jutted out of her ribs. Scuttlemites had already started to assemble around the puddle to eat her

blood. Sadness and sickness swallowed my own fear for a moment. I didn't think she'd had much of a chance. The scavvy scouts must have come on her trying to sneak through this forest and-

The forest.

My eyes snapped wide and I rolled onto my back to look around again, and it hit me: we were back in country I recognised. I'd seen these puffball groves before. Ahead was the Shining Falls roadway. Further along it than I usually went, but who cared? My heart was hammering. We were back on my turf.

As though on cue came a shout, a woman's voice, strong and clear and edged with concern.

'Hup back! Carriers, close up, guards to the outer. Pointers in, pointers in! Hup!'

Now I knew where the scavies were going to get their water. I knew who they were going to take it from. And it looked like there was going to be damn all that I could do to intervene.

I began to manoeuvre my body, trying to get my knees under me. I had no idea what I was going to do, but I wasn't going to lie here and listen to a massacre. Even in the Underhive, even in the bad places out between the settlements, there is a way that good people do things. I was about overdue to act like a good person.

I tried to wriggle along the rusty floor. My little flash of moral insight hadn't helped me work out exactly what I was going to

do. All I could think of was getting closer to the caravan, not being left behind to listen to the killing sounds.

The scaly jerked his head round from where he lay lizard-flat under a puffball cluster and snarled at me. The message was clear: stay still, no noise. The hell with taking orders from a thing like that. I thrashed forward another half-body length and the scaly wriggled over to me, covering the distance with quick and horribly non-human lateral moves of his hands and feet. For a second time his face glared into mine and he pulled his lips back from filed grey teeth. I stopped moving and looked him in his yellow eyes and he snaked back to his position, snorting with annoyance.

Ahead I could hear rustling as the scavies began moving forward through the puffball stems. Any minute now they would have fanned out enough for a pincer, trapping the caravan on their length of roadway. The dead girl might have been missed, but the ambush was still hidden.

It was the rathole all over again: the instant the plan was there I threw myself into it before I had the chance to terrify myself into a coma. I half-curled up as though I'd given in to despair, then drove my boots into the side of the scaly's head. There was a clank of bone-scale on girder and a rustle and pops as the riper puffballs above us burst from the movement.

I'd gambled everything on how much I had managed to get on the scaly's nerves, and gambled well. He couldn't hold himself down any more, gave out the bellow that I'd hoped for and sprang onto me. In the split-second of clear vision I saw two of the nearest scavies twist around to goggle at the

sudden brawl behind them before I was lost in a blur of dust and growling. The scaly had me by the coat-front, effortlessly lifting me and slamming me back down before he switched tactics, grabbed a handful of my hair and rammed the back of my head into the ground. And again, and then by the third time dark fog was throbbing through my vision.

In the dim distance past the roaring in my ears I heard voices shouting, scavvy yelps and human battlecries, female ones, drowned out by gunfire and a tight succession of booms as a volley of grenades went off. The yelps grew to howls and a scraggly volley of matchlock shots in answer, then came a quick burr of autofire that I recognised. Their bastard boss was using my two-tone on the caravan guards.

I suddenly realised that I was hearing all this clear, without the scaly bellowing and snarling at me. I rolled and looked around. He was crouched and peering through a little clump of ropey puffball stalks, staying out of sight. I couldn't see his head or shoulders, but as I watched, one of his arms came back and tugged loose a cord. A nondescript cloth bundle hanging off his belt fell by his feet and opened into a stack of metal chunks that had been slung at his thigh by the holes in their centres. They were thick circles of floormetal, wider than the stewplates you could eat off at Greimplatz, their edges left deliberately ragged. I think I'd have struggled to lift one with one hand.

All the scaly's attention was ahead of him now. He thought I was unconscious, or he didn't care as much about a trussed prisoner behind him as much as about the gun-flashes and



shouts ahead of him. He had no idea that the last ripper-discus to drop off its strap had glanced off the others at a flukey angle and skidded close to me.

I looked at the disc, at him. The idea that I was going to live through any of this was insane. In a minute he'd hear me moving and turn around to finish what he'd started. But hey, that meant I might as well go on. I put my wrists out and started working the binding against a jagged discus tooth.

Ahead of us there was the rumbling sigh of a flamer and a wash of orange light. The scaly half-stood and whipped his arm around faster than anything that big ought to be able to move. The discus in his hand winked away into the fire-tinted half-light and I heard an impact and a brief cry. The scavies' cries turned to laughter and the reports of more matchlocks. The firefight was intensifying.

Concentrate, Kass! I ducked my head and feverishly worked my hands. A strand parted, another. My breath almost stopped as the scaly reached back, but his hand dusted lightly backward to find the next discus by touch and he picked it up without looking around. By the time he stood again and skated another discus into the fight (its path marked by the fall of puffballs as it sheared through their stems) the last strand around my arms was giving way. I sat for a moment, trying to lever the discus up. I could never have thrown it even standing and rested, but anything heavy in my hands would be good when he turned and saw me.

He carefully reached behind him, found the third discus by touch and lifted it away.

That was my last stay of execution: I was holding the last of his missiles. I sat up and aligned the edge with my shins, and the scaly's haste to get going from their rest stop had been my friend: the gut wrapped around my legs was tight but sparse, easy to cut and unravelling as I stood up.

In the back of my head was still the absolute knowledge that I was dead, but each move I'd made had brought me a better way of dying. No reason not to keep

it going. I gave myself one long breath, no more, to stretch and flex my muscles so I didn't simply keel over, and then I took two, three, four tottering steps up behind the scaly with the discus held in both hands. The weight of it shook my arms as I lifted it over my head. No part of that edge wasn't sharp, and I could feel blood trickling from my fingers at the weight and the edge of it.

Don't get stupid, don't get fancy. I wasn't Brakar the Avenger, Donna Ulanti or even Kal spitting Jerico. One shot at this before it would be over one way or the other, so make it good.

The scaly must have sensed something, because he had started to hunch his back and turn his head. Too late. There was a seam in the scales over his shoulders and neck, a crease in the hide, and I brought the edge of the discus down like a guillotine. I used everything left in my muscles and dropped to my knees as well, throwing all my bodyweight into the blow.

He froze, spasmed, dropped the discus in his hand, tried to reach back for the one that jutted out behind his head like a

ruff. He tried to stand up as I fell back but collapsed into a sitting position, facing me as I dropped onto my backside and sat there looking back at him.

There was a weapon by his other hand, a thick-hafted mattock with a head the length of my forearm. His hand fumbled for it, but I got there first. It took both hands to lift it and I had to pirouette my body to manage to swing it. In that time he managed a kick that numbed my thigh and sent me reeling but I stepped away, spun and swung again, connected with his face and finished it. I managed to keep my feet this time, but my mouth was too dry to spit on the corpse.

I gripped the mattock and staggered forward into the fire-flashed darkness.

# 6: RIDING WITH THE CURSE

I zigzagged through the columns, giddy with adrenaline. I stumbled every other step as my feet hit debris and as I tried to swing the mattock, striking sparks off the girders I passed too close to and knocking myself off balance. Each impact shivered down my arms and through my whole body. My memories of it are barely coherent, and I don't think my thoughts at the time made a lot of sense either. All I remember is looking for scavies to kill. And I was spoilt for choice.

The first one was hunched over with his back to me, mumbling as he stuffed the barrel of his matchlock. I missed with the mattock and he turned wide-eyed but I got him in the ear on the return swing and he went down without a sound. I ignored the matchlock and hooked right. The next scavy had a plastic sheet slung around his neck and cradled in it like a baby was a load of rough brown-black fist-sized lumps. They looked like rocks, but I knew better. I waited until his arm drew back to lob one into the caravan, then stepped in and brought the mattock down. I'd aimed for the shoulder joint but the hit caromed off his skull and that was fine too. He lurched to his knees and didn't drop the tox-bomb, and I pushed him onto his face with my foot and splintered the back of his head.

Grenade-boy had a friend near enough to see what had happened and he shrieked and rushed me, and there went the surprise attack. No time to lift the mattock again so I ducked under the pipe it swung at my head, put my shoulder into its

chest and we both went down in a heap.

He howled and bit, and nearly had me off him when my brawling reflexes sent my hand toward my boot for a knife that wasn't there. I put a knee in his midriff and while that distracted him I got his pipe and pressed it hard across his throat. He thrashed, but the pressure quieted him until I could stand, take his pipe and give him three quick whacks to the skull to put paid to him.

I was almost in sight of the roadway now, and for a minute I sagged against a column trying to see what was going on.

The spot was a good one for an ambush, the puffball forest stretching from the shadows we had come out of right up to the roadway. The caravan's only advantage was the drop the scavies had to scramble up onto the roadway. Unable to move forward or back, pincerd with matchlock shots and tox bombs, the guards had formed up around their power-carts and were fighting like devils to keep that one last advantage.

The first rush for the edge of the roadway must have been what the flamer and grenades had answered, from the four dead scavies lying in a cratered and scorched strip of dirt by the drop. But the woman with flamer tanks on her back was down too, slumped against one of the power-carts with one of the scaly's saw-toothed discus jutting out of her chest. Now there was a grim brawl for the edge of the road again, scavies milling while three frightened juves and a knot of moaning pack-slaves swung clubs and axes to keep them back. There were flashes and cracks from both the caravan and back among the puffballs as each side's second line tried

to support its first.

I realised the scavies were screeching 'togz! togz!' and laughed out loud: they were waiting for my victim to lob a tox bomb into their enemies. One did fly from somewhere behind me, but it missed the carts and went long. The guards were well drilled: two of them immediately ran to the ruptured bomb with a sheet of plastic, to smother down its cloud of blinding, skin-frying chemicals.

I hefted the pipe like a quarterstaff, like my poor lost lantern-pole, and went after the next tox-bomber. Why not? I was riding it now. Four in a row, I was invulnerable. I was on fire. I bashed aside a clutch of puffballs and the shower of thick black spore-dust saved me, because on the other side of it the scavy boss in his ridiculous skin-shawl and my gnawed-on hat fired my two-tone at me. The wild blaze barely missed me as I hurled myself sideways, catching a girder-edge on my shoulder with numbing force. The pipe pitched from my fingers and another volley from the two-tone splattered me with shredded fungus meat. Then the weapon was empty and the boss screamed and dropped it clanking to the dirt.

That was the end of him, although not because of me.

The caravan guards knew their work. You can't go forward out of a good ambush because it's set up to stop that. You can't go backward because the ambushers will have counted on that and will trap you, so you go at an ambush's weakest point: punch your way out through the side. And when the scavies seemed to start shooting one another, the guards

took their chance.

The boss had stepped through the wrecked puffballs to stand over me when the grenade went off behind him, peppering him with shrapnel he barely seemed to feel. He had a spear made out of my knife and my lantern-pole, held up two-handed. I swatted at it as it came down and the point gouged my ear, then grounded in the dirt next to my head. Then that woman's voice again, ringing over gunfire and revving chainswords.

'Arm up and swing, you cowardly little wasters! Arm up and fight for your lives! Any of you kills a scavy, I'll write your ticket back at the Falls!'

It was the Curse, the Escher gang from Shining Falls. I couldn't have hoped for better.

Still lying on the ground, I hooked a foot around the boss' heel and shot my other leg out, square into his knee. It snapped and bent backwards. His eyes bulged and his scream had so much guts to it that his voice gave out to a hoarse croak in the middle. He toppled against the girder I'd bounced off and jabbed the spear at my groin. I curled to protect myself and tried to roll away.

Then a las-shot skewered the air between us and he looked around wildly. The third las-shot and an autopistol burst simultaneously hit the scavy behind him, spinning it in the air, its notched knives spinning out of its hands. The boss yelped and tried to use the spear as a crutch to get around the girder, into better cover.

I wasn't having that. I kicked at the pole. I couldn't knock it

from under him, but I forced his weight onto his snapped knee and he shrieked. That was enough for the women to get a bead on him and the next minute the blast from a sawn-off catapulted him forward to land at my feet. I pulled myself upright against the girder and just watched for a long couple of minutes.

The scavies have their little tricks, their sneaks and scabies, their fighting mutants and half-tamed plague-zombies, the infamous tox-bombs they make by pouring the worst Underhive poisons they can sniff out into little easy-to-shatter shells. But when it comes to the pointy end they always need to rig the odds. Darkness, surprise, numbers. Now they were on the back foot and the Curse, better equipped, gutsier and working as a team, went to work on them. Cutting through the dark came a heavy-shouldered woman with a screaming chainsword and a hand flamer whose light glinted off the rings and studs in her ears and face. The other Curse scrappers made a flying wedge behind her, yelling and shooting. Howling scavies dropped or fled or made suicidal forward rushes to be cut down by the pierced-faced woman. Shambling out to watch them pass I saw them go through four enemies without breaking stride, batting aside clumsy swings with professional ease.

Next came the two of the Curse's shooters, moving more slowly with long arms at their shoulders and a trio of pack slaves to soak up any counter-charge, picking off the scavies flitting through the murk to outflank their sisters. They were close enough now for me to see the gang-paint on their faces, the lean muscles on their arms and shoulders, the mottle that



spore-rashes had left across their noses and necks.

I'd escaped from the rats and faced down the scavvies, and so of course it was the bloody humans that were nearly the end of me. If I'd been less delirious with relief I might have realised how wild-eyed and ragged I was, plastered with filth and blood. But I didn't, I just staggered forward. One of them swung and brought to bear on me, and I got out 'Wait, lampligh-' before she fired.

\* \* \*

I didn't black out. I remember a blur, and a hot stripe of pain sitting across my chest from the left side of my breastbone to my right shoulder. Thumps and shocks and then light, and then a cool splatter across my chest and face - water!

That sent the blur away in an eyeblink, and I was sitting up and flailing at the cup being emptied over me.

'He likes it, I think.' A woman's voice, amused, by my ear. 'I think we can spare him another cup but no more than that.' A pair of hands had to close over mine and support my grip as I lifted the cup and gulped it, clamping it to my mouth hard enough to clack the plastic against my teeth. I sat there for more long moments until the last of the water was gone, then doubled forward, coughing explosively, stomach heaving. I'd been hoisted up onto one of the carts and now I had to scrabble not to slide off them and topple down onto the

roadway.

'And that's about enough for you, then,' said that voice again. 'I'm not riding the rest of the trail with a man spewing all over my carts, and you don't look up to walking. I might let you have some more when you can handle it.'

I focused on her upturned face, and put a hand over my mouth in case I did, in fact, vomit onto her. I had enough wit to know that wouldn't be a good move.

She was a sturdy woman, shorter than I had expected, broad-chested and heavy-shouldered, in vest and leggings of dark lizard-hide and her kit held in place with dark metal chains. Her eyes were hard and blue, her hair dyed the same shade and arranged to accentuate a livid pattern of scars and dents from some long-ago injury. Her face was long and hard-boned in the Escher way, and as she spoke a quick little smile flicked onto and off it like a moth flitting through a torch beam.

'Don't think we owe you any more than that,' cut in another. She was taller than blue-hair, her sullen face framed by hoops of braided hair stiffened with oil. She held a lasgun at hip-height.

'If Atta is a little short with you it's because you showed her up,' said the blue-haired woman. 'Hasn't been tending to her piece quite as she should have. That second it took for the beam to heat up is why you've got a brand across you instead of a hole.' She chuckled. 'On the other hand, I had a look at where she hit you and her actual aim was damn fine. Right over your heart. Her reflexes were pretty good too. Twitched that gun right around quick time. Most of the burst went over

your shoulder. It all balances out, I think. Her quickness is why you're breathing now, and drinking our water.'

I looked at Atta and gave her a nod as courtly as I could manage in the circumstances.

'I appreciate your quickness,' I managed to croak.

'Crappity knockoff lasbarrel won't stay clean,' she muttered by way of response and bent to inspect her gun, purple and burgundy hair hanging in her face. The blue-haired woman vaulted easily up onto the cart next to me. I had noticed my laspistol hanging from one of the harness chains around her neck, and she noticed my noticing.

'Ah, then this is yours. Our lugger slaves combed the field to make sure all the scav were gone and they brought me this. Didn't take it for a scav weapon. Too clean. And it works.'

'I had another...'

'Ah, that bastardised little auto we found, that was yours too? I wondered what something with the sound of an Escher shooter was doing in a scav mob. Well, we'll think about it. It's a good piece, even with that

Delaque frame. If Junktion-town doesn't feel like ransoming you then maybe these'll be our little commission for bringing your hide out of there. Scorched or no.' Her tone was still light and amused. Nothing personal, I knew. It was just how gangers worked.

There was a girl,' I said. My voice was hoarse, but better than it had been. 'Young girl, brown hair, crooked nose.'

Blue-hair's face tightened.

'Danda,' she said. 'Point-girl. We think she fought a couple of them before we pulled up behind her. We didn't get a signal but we heard trouble.'

'She's dead,' I told her. 'I can show you where. Saw her there before I could get away from the scaly. She was already gone. I'm sorry.'

Her expression didn't change, not then and not a few seconds later when we heard the cries from out in the puffballs. I sat and looked at my lap while she got down to meet the gang-woman walking out of the grove, her comrades by her sides and the body of the girl in her arms.

It was a good thing I hadn't vomited on blue-hair. I had thought that she was one of the Curse's senior toughs, but as I watched them with dead Danda, wrapping her and placing her in the lead power-cart next to the woman the discus had killed, I saw the way she commanded and the way the other women deferred to her. I'd been speaking to Safine, the Curse's leader, the woman who was supposed to have stood her ground against the plague-zombies at Dying Gorge for a full day with just a sword in each hand. Now I could see the famous burn-scars on her forearms and the workmanship of the chainsword across her back, and that the pistol slung under her left shoulder wasn't las or stub but a fat-snouted plasma. When she climbed back up next to me I was careful to show her a little more respect, and that seemed to please her.

The motors of the four big power-carts whined, hard rubber caterpillar tracks squealed on the metal roadway and the carts started to pull themselves along. Behind each one a pair of slaves gripped the steering yokes under the direction of a gangwoman: whatever machinery steered the carts had long ago broken and now they had to be hauled through changes of direction with muscle-power. More huffing slaves carried bundles of provisions on either side of the caravan and Curse gangers paced between them, tense and sombre. I looked around once for the little column-cave where Danda had died, but it was already gone around the dark shoulder of an Underhive wall.

Safine was quiet as we cleared the gloomy lichen-caves at Phostwood and entered the ruined but more spacious dome between the wood and Junktion's outer borders. The metal of the road disappeared under the packed mud of the dome floor and the cart-tracks crunched on the thin brown crust. With a murmur from Safine the gangers closed formation, and an older one-eyed woman with feather tattoos across her face directed the lifting of stablights into position on the carts. The lights were good and solid, although of no make I could identify, but the bulbs and cores were cheap yellow-burning Orlock knockoffs and the wiring down to the cart motors wasn't all it could be. I started to mention it to Safine - she had that quality of born leaders, just a way about her that made you want her to approve of you -and then caught myself. If I had a favour I could do them then I'd wait and see if I could make it count. I hadn't forgotten her mention of a ransom deal.

Everyone in the Underhive knows about ransoms, and even

the gangers, all but the craziest of them, will look over an injured enemy with a cool head before they finish them off. Knowing when someone you've downed is worth more trussed up and alive than dead and looted is a damn good skill for a gang leader to have, and I'd seen the calculation in the looks Safine had given me.

If I'd been female, they might have rescued me for generosity. The Underhive knocks a lot of the sharp edges off hardcore Hive City attitudes, and the Curse are like the Berserkers, running their own little township instead of roving the badzones, with all the compromises that a practical gang leader has to learn to make. Still, the old House upbringings run deep and Underhive males know to watch their step around an Escher gunwoman, no matter where she's from. Safine was carting me home because she saw a profit in bringing me in alive.

I was getting less and less easy as we crossed the dome floor. My hat would have made it easier to pretend that those tens of metres of empty space above me weren't there. Safine seemed to be relaxed by it, though. She dug up a flask, poured herself more water, and started to talk a little more freely. All of it was worth hearing. The Curse's territories bordered the tamed pocket of Underhive that Junktion had made for itself, but they also stretched out well into the badlands beyond Shining Falls. The way she told it, everywhere was drying up and coming out fighting.

I'd never thought too much about the Penman's Deep water-plant - it wasn't on my usual rounds. I remembered big

condenser vanes sticking into horrifying pits that went up and down forever, and tunnels lined with pipes and clanging machinery. But really they were just, well, there. The kind of thing you find in the Underhive sometimes, abandoned but working or at least fixable, like the cable-cars over the Coma Gulch scrapmines. Underhivers get fatalistic about stuff like this. If you can keep it working and maybe turn a cred or three it's fine. When something happens you go on your way.

Listening to Safine tell what was happening all through the badzones, I realised that those clanking old engines must have fed water into many more places than just Junktion. The hints had been there - I thought with a twist of guilt about Enning and his family, leaving Twodog and going on the road looking for water - but I guess I hadn't really known it, not until Safine's words brought it alive.

Everywhere for days' walk around was a dustbowl. The causeway underneath Wilhelm's Crossing now just spanned a gully full of silt. At Coma Gulch the constant drizzle from the high pipes not only brought water but settled and sluiced away the metal-dust drifting down from the Hive City waste pits, but now that was gone. A chain of holesteads linking Tarvo with Junktion and the Gulch had died, one after the other, as the bores and pipe-taps they used to feed their algae pits simply no longer ran. Some families had taken to the road, and some had tried to backtrack their water sources to try and find other supplies. Many of those hadn't been seen again.

And several places had been found in ruins, the algae vats stripped or smashed, the families dead or just gone. One had

been in Curse territory, a pair of sisters from hive-city who'd barricaded off a kilometre of empty corridors near Crossing and Tarvo and farmed fungus and pudge-moths. They and their hired hands had put up a fight, Safine said with her face grim, but whatever it was had outfought them, and partly eaten them.

Could have been scavies, but could have been any number of other things. The worse the drought got, the further the bad things had to range to find their drink and the harder they'd fight for it. I told Safine about the camp-less scavy tribe, and a rat nest where we hadn't seen one before, and she nodded grimly.

'It's happening all over, Kass, every direction. Thank the Motherlode the Falls are partly fed by flows from elsewhere or we'd be on the road and half-parched like these other poor spitters, instead of being able to bring it into Junktion to sell. Wondering why those scavies kept you alive?' I shrugged. 'Dancy said they found a whole crowd of them, mostly the bigger ones, with two or three dead rats each, big ones like you shot. Stuck on skewers, all in a row, neat as you please. The ones that had been gnawed on had been wrapped up to try and keep them from dribbling everywhere.'

'Rats?' My stomach lurched.

'Probably the same ones you shot, Dancy said she saw what looked like las-burns on them. You were kept alive while they ate the dead meat. The wet dead meat. It was easier to truss you and carry your water around in your living skin.'

'I follow you,' I said, although I didn't particularly like it.



'When I shot some of the first rats that came at me I used the two-tone. The autogun you rescued.' She chuckled at the name. 'When I popped some of them I remember some of the others stopping to lap the blood.'

What did you think of that?'

'I didn't, not at the time. I was busy' She acknowledged the point with a nod. 'But I'm going to guess the moisture in front of them even took their minds off fighting me.'

You're right. It's not just the people. It's be easier if it were. But the wildlife that was minding its own business off in all the hidden places is getting desperate enough for water. We've burned more ammo than we can really afford keeping the vermin out of Shining Falls. Hell, the whole reason we're bringing a water-stash into Junktion is our end of the roadway is getting so infested not too many of the traders will come up it any more. Everything is coming out to play.' She looked over at me. 'What's wrong?'

I was staring at the palms of my hands, my eyes widening. 'Um,' I said.

I think I dropped in Safine's estimation after I remembered my other injuries, where those big mutant-bastard rats had clawed and pricked me. Truth to tell I was ashamed myself. I'd been cut and had gone crawling around in litter and filth. It should have been the first thing I saw to as soon as they got me up on the cart. A five-year-old would know better. Had I spent so much time around the scavvies I wanted to rot myself away to look more like them?

Safine didn't say any of that. All she said was 'look, times are hard for all of us and we just can't spare the supplies to treat your wounds.'

'I don't think anybody's going to pay a ransom for my corpse,' I said bluntly.

Safine laughed. 'I wouldn't worry about that. I don't think you're going to die before we reach Junktion and I'm sure they're going to do their best to save one of their precious lamplighters. And hey, if the infection's too far gone by the time we get there then, well, that's not my problem is it?'

She had a point. The scratches weren't that bad and I probably would survive until Junktion. I just wasn't prepared to take that chance. If it was just general Underhive dirt and grime in my cuts and abrasions then that was bad enough but I'd been writhing around in rat filth. Think Kass, think.

Too late for that, Safine. The infection's already took hold.' I rolled up my sleeve, carefully transferring some of the grunge and slime from my hands onto my forearm. The Escher took one look at the purple-green hue of the area between my elbow and wrist and said, Talk to Silk, with the autogun and the red hood, nearside to the wagon behind us.'

It had all been there in Safine's look. For the next twenty minutes I said it all for her in my head as Silk, chuckling, handed me a medicine bag and took my filthy rag of a coat while I went over my scratches with stingwater and proudweed paste.

('Oh no you don't,' said Silk when she caught me eyeing a tube of medicine-gel that looked to be of Hive City make, and expensive. 'You stick to the old-fashioned remedies, that will do you fine for those kiddy-scratches.')

The cuts on my hands had worried me the most but I didn't see the swelling or weeping I'd been afraid of. On my chest the scratches were deeper and angrier, and the skin around the bottom two had turned shiny and red. They took the proudweed and started to throb. The scratches were barely even punctures, and Silk watched with amusement as I dabbed at them to sterilise them.

'Safine said you were the one who tipped us. Got the scaly fighting to give us a warning after they got Danda.'

I nodded. The weird fighting fever I'd been riding already seemed unreal, but Silk seemed to accept it. She held up a metal flask.

'Booze, this, not water. Good Wildsnake from Mirror-Bitten. Toast Danda's memory with me.'

We each took a swallow and it was damn good, barely any burn and smoky as you please. Then Silk looked at my scratches, took a second mouthful and sprayed it onto my chest. I yelped with pain as the alcohol hit my wounds and Silk threw back her head, bared her strong yellow teeth and laughed so loudly that even the pack-slaves looked around to see what was going on.

The Wildsnake hit me harder than I had expected, making

me drowsy enough to stretch out on the cart, my coat wadded between two barrels as a mattress. I felt exhausted, but I must still have been wired from the fighting: despite the drowsiness I felt edgy and fidgety when I lay down.

I let my eyes half-close and made do with surreptitiously watching one of the cart guards instead. She was short, with pitch-black hair and beautiful dark eyes that slanted a little at the corners. There was only a little scarring on her, light marks across the jawline that could have been a hit from something serrated or maybe a dose of threader's blight that she hadn't had treated in time. Muscles were visible in her arms and her stomach as she loped alongside the cart or leapt up to hang off the side of it to rest.

Was she about Tanny's age? No, Tanny would have been older. Still, no reason not to watch her. Or at least not until Safine next to me said you're making her uncomfortable, Kass'. I had had no idea either of them had known I was watching, but after that I propped myself up on sore arms and watched the lights of the Junction road slowly roll toward us out of the dark.

# 7. THE BUNKERHOUSE

The last leg of that trip home was good-weird, and turned bad-weird in a hurry.

After we passed the outer turf marker (JUNKTION burned into the face of a rusted-open metal gate, surrounded by spiked-up ripperjack and scavvy skeletons) I started to relax. It was the relief of familiarity all over again, finding myself in turf that I knew. Knew? Spit on that, turf I almost owned. I was smiling to myself as we crossed the bridgeway over that eerie carpet of fungus-cups, where I'd been fixing lights only... only...

How long ago? How long had this whole odyssey taken? I realised I had no idea. No point in asking Safine - most Underhive settlements have their own ideas about when lightson and lightsout start. Her reckoning would be different to mine. I'd just have to wait and see. I probably hadn't been away for the half-dozen lifetimes it felt like.

The mists were up over the Fog Flats, and as we rolled forward through them people started to appear along the trail edges, lines of washed-out grey shapes in the swirls of vapour. I had half been expecting people, but not the sullen silence. No shouting or pleading (and a sneaking, shameful part of me was glad of it), just mute gazes and quick scrambles out of the path of the gangers. They unnerved me, and unnerved the women, too: Safine's gangers were exchanging uneasy looks across the bent backs of the pack slaves. A new glow-green slogan was visible on a rubble-

stack opposite the liftport gates: THE FATHERS DRINK AND OUR CHILDREN THIRST. With a stab I remembered the start of the whole thing, the voices of Heliko's murderers, stalking me along my rounds. Were they still out there? Or waiting up ahead? I clutched my dead, useless laspistol and looked around edgily.

The liftport guard seemed to have increased. As we wound along the road there was never a point where a guard or two wasn't pacing us inside the fence, and as we left the Flats for the gate a knot of them stood and watched us go. Maybe it was the fog, but I had trouble picking out anyone I knew. That was odd. The lamplighters and the town watch tended to be on good terms.

Safine, her face a mask of distaste at the ruined shanty town, began calling orders that saw the caravan slow and reform. Carts in a square, the pack slaves in the centre, women hefting longarms perched up high and the scrappers strolling on each side. Walking just below me was the woman I'd seen lead the charge into the scavies, the tiny red indicator lights on her chainsword matching the little blue igniter of the hand flamer in her other hand. Even the hint of combat had her shoulders knotting and her breath huffing in and out of her nostrils. I decided this was not a woman I cared to get to know, but when I shuffled closer to Safine I could hear the tiny, almost subliminal buzz of the plasma pistol at her side charging up. That wasn't a lot better.

We came to the gate nice and slow, all the parapet stablights on us bar the end ones, which turned outwards to

light up metal shapes hanging at each end of the gate. I squinted at them, but the other lights in my eyes stopped me making out what they were. The gate lights were still bright and strong, and I felt a nice twinge of professional pride.

For all of about five seconds. Safine leaned towards me.

What was that you said about the crowds and the mobs?' she asked, and with a hard beat of unease against my ribs I realised she was right. We were four power-carts loaded up with barrels of water, for sump's sake, and Nardo and I had practically been mobbed just because we might be carrying flasks. Now I could see nothing moving around us at all. The open floor was as dead and empty as the ruined shanties had been. What had happened?

Nothing good, I was prepared to bet. We were close enough to the gate that now I could see things dangling above the gateposts were.

Gibbets.

Safine's women were just as aware of the strangeness of the situation, and they were obviously and aching aware of their vulnerability, standing in the open under lights and covered by who knew how many guns?

Well, if it weren't for them I'd be lying gutted somewhere in the puffball forest. So I stood up and stared into the lights over the centre of the gate.

'Open up! You know me, I'm Sinden Kass. I'm back from my rounds.' Helmawr's rump, that sounded stupid. 'I was taken by scawies and rescued by the Curse.' I gestured at them. 'Open

the gate.'

There was a long pause. I wondered who was behind the lights. Surely not the Steelheads still? Please not the Steelheads.

'Hello, little raggedy scawvy-kisser!' shouted a scratchy voice from the rampart. Crap.

'Who you got there, women? That your pet? Sniff out your slops for you, does he?' There were hoots of laughter from up and down the parapet. I kept my voice steady.

'I'm a Junktion lamplighter, whoever you are. I don't know if anyone's explained what that means, but they should have. I answer directly to the Junktion town fathers.' Someone sniggered at that, and unease tapped against my ribs again. 'I'm coming back after being attacked and rescued. These women have water to sell, and you've got rust in your head if you think the fathers won't want to buy. Open the spitting gates now!

At first there was no response. Then, after a pause just insolently long enough to make the point that they were proceeding in their own damn time, the little door set into the main gate clanked and squeaked open and four Steelheads came sauntering out, each lit by a stablight as though they were on stage in one of the clip joints around Cyclops Square. The metallic ink on their head tattoos shone like the spikes on their vambraces and collars and the gleam off their polished boots. They carried axes and cleavers slung at their backs and their big hands gripped thick-barrelled slubbers, the kind the House Goliath factories churned out and anyone else



practically needed a tripod to use.

Safine and her women stood in poses both carefully calculated and totally unselfconscious. The angles of hips, shoulders and heads, the way hands rested on weapons, the way fingers stroked gun-grips or blade-handles, the way that a casual shift of position happened to move their weight onto both feet so they could move fast in an instant. Anyone who's seen two gangs circle one another in a town or any kind of neutral ground knows about the little dances, the preening and bravado. I'd seen it plenty of times.

The Steelheads and the Curse. Goliath and Escher. What a pair to get caught between. Some gangs manage to leave their House baggage behind when they abandon Hive City, but these two? Their kind of hate even makes the Orlock-Delaque feud look like a juves' squabble. Goliath and Escher. Please, someone put me back in the rathole.

Looking up at Safine didn't suit the Steelhead deputation - not good for the pose - so they switched their gaze to the women on the ground. They grow them big in House Goliath, they brag about it, and three of the four were easily big enough to look down their noses at any member of the Curse they stood next to. I watched the grins spread across their faces as they took that fact in.

'Water tithe,' said the tallest one after another calculated pause, 'on whatever you're carrying. Payable per person. Cut of your water gets you in. Show us what you got and we'll inform you of the exact measure of payment.' Two of the others sniggered. The fourth, much younger, smooth skin and

fresh tats and all his teeth, just shifted from foot to foot and stared.

'What's the tithe for each of us, then?' Safine asked from the top of the cart. Her pose hadn't changed, one hand casually on the grips of the plasma pistol. Her voice was level.

'Depends,' said the lead Steelhead without missing a beat. 'Depends on the discretion of the duly-deputised Junktion town watch officer on, uh, watch.' Sniggers again at 'discretion'. In the corner of my eye I saw Safine shoot me a look. I couldn't tell what the thought behind it was, but I thought it might be something like thanks for the warning, I don't think. Then she stared at the Steelheads again. The tension in the air was spitting like fatty meat on a Greimplatz grill.

'Look at the water!' The juve must have spoken out of turn, because even the men next to him jumped a little. I'd started enough to have to watch my balance. My hand itched for the grips of my laspistol, except I knew the cell was dry. 'Gruett! Look over the tops o' them carts! Barrels and barrels!'

Gruett's eyes were alight. Metal glinted when he ran his tongue over his lips: piercings or metal teeth or both. Heads turned around me as the Curse looked to Safine for a cue to art. She spread her fingers. Not now.

'Water tithe might be pretty heavy for this lot,' said Gruett in a rumbling, mock-thoughtful voice. 'Bringing this into Junktion, see? Lot of value here. Think my discretion's going to let me set a pretty good tithe on this.' He was strolling around the side of the caravan, out of my view.

'How about our lamplighter, Steelhead?' asked Safine. I

wondered if I'd imagined the edge in her voice. Below me on my other side the woman who'd been huffing her breath was now moaning softly, her chainsword hand twitching. Silk had moved forward and gently taken her arm.

I stood up and looked down at Gruett and his juve. If I was going to be a bargaining chip I was going to do the bargaining myself. A man has his dignity.

'I'm vouching for them, Gruett, if that's your name. I told you, I'm a Junktion lamplighter. They're coming through the gates on my recognisance. Get Yonni from the bunkerhouse, or town father Harnos. I am not going to be kept up here any longer.' Mentioning Harnos was a gamble, but this whole mess needed a circuit-breaker and soon.

Some bastard Steelhead on the gate broke it the wrong way.

'I remember that one! Came up here lightson, one before last, all crawling around on the catwalk here like a litde broken-legged rat! Shoulda seen him, Gruett! Look at him now!' Gruett joined in the laughter.

'Get off the cart, Kass.' That was Safine, speaking low and soft to me. There was no trace of anger in her voice, just calm command.

'I think I can-'

'No. You've done what you can. I'll thank you for it and spare you any more of this. Your pole and hat and guns are on the rack above the steering yoke on the back of this cart. Get them, climb down. Go through the gates by yourself. If you can

find someone on that gate crew who isn't a Steelhead...'

'I understand you.' She nodded to me. If I'd tried to say anything more I'd only have stuttered and lingered and so I shuffled to the back of the cart and climbed stiffly down. Safine may have been a hard-nosed, man-hating bitch but she knew that I was her only chance of getting anything even remotely approaching a fair deal for her water.

The Steelheads were already amongst the carts, swaggering with the new confidence that none of the Escher women were going to draw down on them, not with the pintle guns on the gate covering them. The pack slaves kept their eyes down as they were shouldered aside. The gangwomen, stony-faced, made small steps and concessions, just enough so that a mock-accidental collision or gesture from a Steelhead wouldn't knock them off-balance. I was conscious of my filthy, ragged clothes as I clapped my chewed hat onto my head and bundled my pole and the two-tone into what was left of my coat.

I was looking over my shoulder at the caravan when I walked into the Steelhead. He was a head taller than me, his vest cut back to emphasise the muscles he'd worked on the way some Goliaths do, with special exercises to make each muscle stand out under his skin. His hair was shaved up to a jagged mane at the crown of his head and slathered with metal-dust to make it shine. Thick metal bands through his septum flared his nose back like a dust-hog's. A rough tattoo squatted on the side of his thick neck, a skull topped by a dull metallic dome held on with crudely-drawn screws and rivets.

I sidestepped to go around him and he stepped to keep in front of me. He wore a bright grin and his eyes didn't leave mine.

There was a clank and boom of metal and a burst of happy bellowing. Two Steelheads double-timed past with a Curse water-drum across their straining shoulders. There were cheers from the gates, and from somewhere I heard Gruett's voice: 'Of course we tithe you on what you arrived at our town gate with, not what you might leave it with, that's only fair, of course.'

The Steelhead glared at me, angry that I wasn't entertaining him. That lasted a long moment, and then he lost interest and shoved past me to where his gangmates were stripping the packs off the Curse slaves and dumping their contents out onto the road. I walked for the gate again, resisting the urge to scamper for cover. Just before I stepped into the gate I turned and looked back.

Safine still stood proud on her cart as the Steelheads looted her water out from under her. One hand was on her pistol but she knew as well as I did how a fight here would go. She wasn't looking at me, and I decided I was glad. She'd told me to go, but now that

I was going I suddenly didn't know if I could have met her eyes.

I turned and walked away. I'm good at turning and walking away. Ask anybody.

I looked toward the gatehouse and up to the parapet, trying to spot anyone in this nightmare parody of Junktion whom I actually knew. Of course not, just two more Steelheads lounging by the gatehouse door. I made to walk past them, then stopped and looked again.

They were two of the three that had walked out of Junktion with me the last time I had passed through these gates, the sneering escorts who'd abandoned me at the crossroads. They weren't sneering now, just looking at me with dull anger. Both their faces were livid with bruises. One's eyes had swollen so that he had to shove his head forward to see me, the other's nose had been fresh-broken. Their Goliath finery, the nose-studs and ear-chains, had been ripped away. Apparently they had been meant to stay with me and guard me after all, and my disappearance had been taken out on them. It was sort of hard to feel sympathy.

A blob of phlegm arced down off the rampart, missed my hat brim by a fingers' breadth and splatted into the grit by my boot. Laughter from above. I took the hint and walked.

How could this be real? How long had it been since I had come through the gate and gone down to the Bunkerhouse with Nardo, coming in off our rounds and ready to knock off and buy some booze? How could I be staggering down here now, a wreck in barely-recognisable clothes, covered in cuts and welts and cramping with hunger at the smell of cooking-grease from Greimplatz? How could this not be some sump-spat dream?

I suddenly just wanted to stop fighting it. This was not meant

to be my job. None of it. There was a reason I had got so good at moving on. I couldn't deal with this. I wondered what would happen if I just slumped down and waited for the whole spitting lot of it to go away.

I didn't ever actually answer that, not consciously. I saw Yonni come up out of the Bunkerhouse steps ahead of me and suddenly the despair was gone and the anger was there. It made my eyes widen and my hands twitch and it wasn't until Yonni batted my hands away that I realised I'd crossed the distance to him and reached for his jacket front.

'Kass! Ratspit, but we thought you were dead! What in-'

'Swallow it, Yonni! I don't care! What piece of offal is in charge at the liftport gate? Steelheads, Yonni! They're looting a caravan the Curse brought down from Shining Falls to sell to the town fathers! Yonni, there is water at those gates, spitting barrels of it! And the bastards with those slogans, they're still hunting lamplighters, Yonni, they're still after me, and Heliko's in on it for sure! Are we all going to just sit while-'

It was my turn to get cut off as Yonni clamped my head in his arm and marched me back through the doors. The headlock held my jaw shut and over my angry grunts he muttered into my ear.

Things are different, Kass, use your brain and work it out. Things are not the same, stop thrashing about and yipping like an infant! What do you think it's going to do? Get your wits back, you idiot!'

Finally as we got to the stairs Yonni let me go. I staggered three or four steps and bounced off a wall, then propped

myself against it and glared at him. I was panting and swaying. Yonni's expression mixed sympathy and disgust.

'You need to know what's been going on. I'm to take you before the fathers in a minute and I don't want to blindside you.'

'Want to what? What could be worse than this? Yonni, the liftport gate's being run by bastard Steelheads and there's no Junktion people in sight! They're looting the caravans! Where are the real gate-guards?'

Things are changing fast. The Steelheads and the Firebrands are on the up. The Steelheads are the gate-guards now.'

'Ohh, sump's arse, Yonni...' The anger was gone, the despair was back. I wished I hadn't heard it, wanted to not have heard it. Volk's Firebrands. Had I thought it couldn't get any worse after the Steelheads? Hah.

'Shut up and listen, Kass, you need to find your feet as fast as you can. The Steelheads you know about now. You saw it for yourself. Gruett, their leader, is a crew boss on the Junktion watch now. They're in the door. Take a minute to deal with it.'

The Firebrands?'

'We thought they'd moved on after the Curse and the Berserkers kicked them out of Tarvo but they're back. Turns out they got on the good side of town father Stope when they gave Heggoran's Nightmares a hiding at Wilhelm's Crossing and let him get his toll racket on the causeway going again. Stope's convinced they're his friends and partners and Volk



was smart enough to play up to him. So they're in too. You're not the only one Heliko's after, either, Kass. He led a hit on the fathers' water cisterns and there are watchmen dead up on the Black Pile. The fathers are scared. So be warned, Kass. Keep your head down.'

What spitting town am I in, Yonni? 'Cos it isn't one I recognise.'

He didn't answer, just pointed his great bony chin up the stairs. I went.

It was a first - three town fathers at once, to talk to me direct and not through Yonni or some flunky. We went up past the Boodicker's Gallery to the third level, a place I'd never seen before. The rooms were stuffy and run-down, not matching the hype at all.

There was air-cleaning machinery somewhere in the guts of the building and the fathers were waiting for me in a little bare box of a room by one of the vents. The flue came out of the wall in a great bulge that grew a polished brass trumpet like a giant fungus-cup, pushing breeze into the room. The three town fathers were perched on a bench of welded metal breathing the smell- and taint-free air as it washed toward them.

Harmos was on the right hand side, furthest away from me. His shoulders were slack and his eyes half closed. I'd never seen him like that before.

Sitting on the near end of the bench was the uphive Guilder

I didn't recognise at first, not until he smiled at me. It was the man who'd been waiting while Harnos grilled me and Nardo after our last rounds. His hair was held in by a cap of the same rough black weave as his dust-shawl, and the gown and leggings underneath were understated grey. There was nothing understated about the Guilder medallion he wore on his chest, held in plain sight now. It was big and thick enough for my late lamented scaly captor to use as a discus, and the rim and chain were crusted with pearl-spores and spider-eyes.

In the middle, sitting with his knees apart and crowding the other two to each end of the bench, was town father Stope, with his waxed black crew-cut and extravagant, pointed man-breasts that were pushed so far up by his great ball of a stomach that his nipples were aiming at the ceiling. It's hard to get truly fat in the Underhive, but if you're a town father you can manage it well enough.

It was Stope who spoke first.

'We thought we'd lost our last lamplighter,' he said. He had some kind of jaundice that gave his skin a sickly cast under the room's pearly white light. That wouldn't do, would it? Now of all times we need to keep ourselves safe and well lit. This is something this town is famous for, after all.'

He seemed to be waiting for an answer, so what the hell.

'I don't know how safe or well lit things out there are going to be for long, sir. I was meant to be out on a simple round and back by lightsout, but instead I got stalked by some of Garm Heliko's gunboys and hunted by the biggest mutie-rats I've

seen in Junktion since I came here, then nearly went in a scawvy pot. If it weren't for the Curse coming down the Shining Falls roadway I wouldn't be here talking to you now.'

'You're overestimating the danger, Kass,' Stope shot back over the last of my words. 'Junktion has very capable town defences and, always has... and we've added to them. Two tough leaders with excellent reputations have taken, up, deputation... papers.' As Stope talked he tended to run himself out of breath and finish his sentence hitching and gasping. The Steelheads are helping to keep the walls and gates safe and Master Volk, who, is, a... personal acquaintance of mine are making sure the streets are, kept... safe.' He wheezed for a few moments.

'Doing a better job than you lot did, Kass,' put in Harnos without looking at me. His voice was lower and his words were running together and I realised with a shock that he was drunk. Drunk or doped, but spit it, they were both unthinkable. Harnos losing control? Harnos?

'Be fair on the man,' put in the Guilder. His voice was a leisurely purr that heated up my distrust of him about fivefold. 'Lamplighters have never been supposed to keep order by themselves. Their task has always been very specific'

The lamplighters do what they're told. We told them to sniff out whoever was painting those spitting slogans. And did they? What just happened on the Black Pile?'

What did just happen on the Black Pile, sirs?' In the corner of my eye Yonni was shifting feet again and giving me a glare like a melta-torch.

'Not your concern!' barked Harnos loudly enough to make Stope jump, the folds of the fat father's neck squashing and rearranging. You do your spitting work.' His voice was rising and falling, and by the end of the sentence he was talking softly and almost mildly. Juice of some kind in him, for sure. Harnos, drugged. How had this happened so fast?

'Just some people caught up in this "water for all" rubbish,' said the Guilder. The ones Harnos thinks you should have been spotting. The Heliko criminal and his slogan-painters seem to think they're the heart of some brand-new bandit army. Some of them got pushy and were controlled. It won't happen again. You don't need to know more.'

Stope nodded agreement.

'We're wasting time,' he said. What I want from you is answers, not questions, Kass. You've just come in from rounds, on the, town, outskirts... correct?' As if he couldn't tell from the way I looked. I realised that I still had my possessions bundled in my arms. 'If you've had any presence of mind in your adventures you can, do the, town a... service.'

And that was how it went. Harnos barely said another word: he stared into the flue like I've seen people stare into campfires on the trade trails. After a while he started to rock slightly. The other two took it in turns, sinking their teeth into my report, demanding I tell them things I couldn't know.

How many other scawy bands were out there? How much water had the Curse brought? How much had the Steelheads taken, and how much more was stashed at Shining Falls? What kind of strength was guarding it there? How were they

armed? Specifically what wildlife movements had Safine told me about? How much of this had I verified with my own eyes?

It wasn't until later I realised they hadn't asked anything about Heliko's thugs. About that they didn't seem to care.

I put up with it as long as I could, but the hours I'd spent outside the walls were catching up with me fast. At one point I bent to set down my bundle of gear and almost tipped over as my knees failed to hold my balance. Yonni was there with a hand on my shoulder, propping me up again, and he took the bundle out of my hands and quietly disappeared with it. I straightened up, swaying, and tried to focus.

What the still anonymous Guilder was saying was 'enough'.

We've got everything useful that we can out of him. I'd rather rest him than wring him dry and be the death of him.'

Stope made a sort of rumbling bark that seemed to mean contempt.

'None of that, now,' the Guilder replied. 'Isn't he your last lamplighter? I think right at the moment your town needs its lights running more than ever, don't you?' Stope's body shifted uncomfortably in its fatty cocoon. Harnos was nodding forward and looked half asleep. Looking at the weird little trio, I missed my cue to leave. When I looked back at the Guilder he was inclining his head toward the door, with that soft amusement still in his eyes.

'Interview over, Last of the Lamplighters,' he told me, and tilted his head a little further. 'Be careful on the street. I don't know if that half-baked "lamplighter spy" vendetta is

spreading, but thirst turns out to have a way of making people nasty. So does resentment, and I think people know you don't have to pay the town for your water ration. Watch yourself.' He kept looking at me until I managed to shuffle my feet into motion.

Yonni was waiting for me outside with my bundle under one arm, and with the other hand he steered me away from the door and down the stairs until I stood, still swaying, on the stained matting of the ground-hall. He gave me an appraising look for maybe five seconds, and then said 'you're not walking into Junktion alone looking like that' and took my arm again. Together we walked slowly out of the ground-hall and into Chartists' Alley.

I could barely take it in: in the time it took us to walk the length of the Alley toward the Black Pile I'd counted two household doors that had been smashed in, then fastened back and nailed over. Painted across each in red was the word REDEEMED. Volk's Firebrands at work. There were bodies sprawled at the alley's edges. Only one of them tried to move as we passed by.

What is it, Yonni? What happened that I'm not supposed to ask about? How can it change like this?' My voice was plaintive and cracking. I could feel every step we took. Everything I wore seemed to be made of rasp-paper, scraping at my skin. I wanted to sleep.

Yonni held me up, shushed my questions, looked around to see who might overhear us. We walked together along the route I had walked that night of the attacks, around the base of

the Black Pile by the side of the canal, then past the tunnel that led to the Brass Pit.

My rooms were deep in the honeycomb of old tunnels behind the high wall that loomed over the Brass Pit and the market pits of the Bell Common. There were dents and scratches around the shutter door but I didn't pay them much mind. Yonni was practically carrying me now and once we were in the lightless metal box where I lived he let me totter to my pallet and lit a globulb, tapping deftly at it until it brightened and gave us a room full of smeary yellow shadows to talk by.

I wanted to sleep, but I couldn't until I'd heard. 'Alright, Yonni, I'm too tired to be lied to. What's happening to my town?' He told me.

## 8: LITTLE SISTER

I think I slept after Yonni left. I remember waking stiff and hurting, groaning and half-consciously moving my limbs, but I must have fallen asleep again when my body had loosened itself because there were things I thought I remembered about the next few hours that couldn't have happened. I was back among the scavies in the puffball forest, but now the puffballs were as high as the Hive itself, pushing up into a giant empty space that terrified me and made me run for cover in the puffball stalks. They were all there: Safine, Yonni, dead Danda, Mudeye, Harnos, even the Steelhead boss, all looking out solemnly from hiding-places they had already found as I ran past looking for a bolthole of my own. I ran for what seemed like forever, my steps growing slower and more laborious as I felt the weight of the emptiness pressing down on me more and more, until when I was almost paralysed I saw Tanny looking at me and the dream broke.

There was no sleeping after a dream ended with her, and I didn't try. There was no crackling from my joints as I sat up, but I felt like there should have been. I shifted onto my feet and practically fell on my face as my legs all but gave way. Propped against the pallet, I dragged over the bundle that Yonni had left.

'Nardo's ration is in here too, Kass.' It was the last thing he



had told me before my exhausted brain winked out. 'Only you didn't hear that from me and you didn't even get it from me. The fathers are scared. They haven't cut the rations and upped the prices for fun. Even for the lamplighters, it's no work no water. They'll let Nardo dry up and die if he doesn't come good, so you take him this and look after him, and you didn't get his water from me.'

There were four tin flasks bundled up in my old coat along with the two-tone, my lantern-pole and my ripped and grubby tool bag. I'd had the coat for years but it was the water-flasks I hugged to my chest.

Under my clothes I wore a clotted second skin of filth. Underhivers are used to dust and grime but this was something other. If I didn't get clean I thought I might go insane.

My legs cramped enough to make me cry out when I tried to stand on them again, but I managed a scawnylike crouch-shuffle through the doorway opposite the pallet, around the corner of my little L-shaped room where the gutter-drain and washing gear was. I snagged the wash-bowl from its shelf next to where my shaving mirror balanced against the wall. There was a juice-cable hanging down in the corner beyond it and I sat there and looked at it. Getting up and clipping the lead for my heating pan to it would mean standing up straight. I wondered if I were up to it. It seemed very far away up there. Maybe if I looked at it long enough it would just float through the air and set itself down in front of me. Hah. I looked at it some more and my thoughts started to wander.

They wandered to the smashed doors I'd seen, and the

news about Junktion's other watch gang. Volk's Firebrands. Redemptionists. House Cawdor gang-gunnies.

Just about any Junktioner (apart from town father Stope, apparently) could tell you that the Firebrands did not make friends. They were bloodthirsty kill-happy bastards from Hive City's House Cawdor who'd come down the Well about three years before looking for new conquests.

Cawdors aren't popular here, them and their Church of the Red Redemption. In most places, here or in Hive City, gutting and burning anyone who looks at you crosswise as a spiritually poisoned infidel in need of redemption quickly sees you on the wrong end of a gunbarrel yourself. Not in House Cawdor, or the one-sixth of Hive City they rule. The Redemption is that House's official religion, which means a steady stream of evangelical maniacs bringing it down to the Underhive with them. The craziest of all are the Redeptor Priests, the ones who've lost all interest in founding settlements or even staking out a gang turf. All they want to do is go to war. Kill and clean and pray and burn, leave a trail of blood and ashes through the Underhive. Maniacs like Volk.

I realised I was still sitting and staring at the juice cable. I blinked and experimentally nibbed my legs. They still twinged and throbbed and hurt to move. Time for some more expensive measures. I reached over, shoulder creaking, and pulled a plastic-wicker box out from the stacked shelves behind me. The bottle of Wildsnake was in there, with that deliciously thick, clear shine even through the glass and dust. I broke the seal and took a sip. The good stuff. Brewed at

Dripdown, one of the distillers' settlements at Mirror-Bitten, and almost as good as what Silk had shared with me. I took another mouthful and picked up my thoughts while I waited to see if the drink would relax my muscles.

I'm sure it's very complicated being a Redemptionist. They seem to have an endless list of hymns and prayers and curses to learn, and in my time around the Underhive I've seen their insane Redemptor Priests - usually being dragged through the town gates behind a bounty hunter crew - with heavy books or data-cages full of laws and sayings and holy writ. Those tend to get burned or smashed when the Priest goes on the gallows.

But the upshot is simple. They hate everyone and everything except themselves, and I'm not too sure about the 'except'. If you're careful not to cross them they'll settle for trying to make you as crazy as they are. If you do one single thing they don't like then they'll have you dead and burned the first chance they get. That's all I've ever really understood about what the Redemptionists believe and it's all I think I'll ever really care to understand.

I don't know whether the Wildsnake was relaxing my aching body or if it was just the buzz that stopped me noticing, but either was fine by me. I found I could stand, even stretch a little, and jack the heating pan into the wall cable. I poured a third of the first water flask into the pan and sat back to wait for the coil to heat.

The only reason the Cawdor gangs can live at all is that the need to make a living has to temper their zeal. If you burn a

trading post to the ground the first time you see a boozing hole or a kootchie-joint you end up dead for a bounty or starving in the badzones, the way the full-fledged crusading Reddies all do sooner or later. So they deal with it, like the Escher have to learn to deal with males. They buckle those masks around their heads and pretend they're able to stay above the rest of us. They strike deals.

Like the Firebrands had struck a deal with Stope, after Garm Heliko came back.

That was what frightened me. When Volk and his enforcer, Brother Hetch, had come out of the badzones and taken the reins of the Firebrands, talk in Junktion didn't rate the threat so high. However bad their reputations were - plenty bad - we all knew that full-on Redemptionists were far too crazy for the Firebrands to stay stable for long. They'd go far enough over the line for even the Cawdor to turn on them, or their madness would spread to the rest of the gang and it would use itself up in some suicidal crusade and that would be the end of it.

But Volk was making deals. He had got himself into Junktion. He had had the bounty posters for himself and Hetch taken down. He was getting smart. There was something about that thought that even pushed Garm Heliko's lamplighter-hunting killboys to one side.

The heating coil was a dull red like it was infected. That was as hot as it got, so I picked the pan up by the wrapping handle and dumped the water into my washbowl. It steamed under my face as I ran a double handful of water through my hair and over my scalp. It felt as good as the Wildsnake had

tasted. I rubbed my wet hands over my face and tried to keep my thoughts on track.

As I had gone through the gates on that last, horrible round, I remembered how I'd left Junktion: in shadow. Yonni had started the big arcs up at lightson, and I'd done what I could, but I'd been brooding about the dimness of the lights as I'd left. But I hadn't been there when the effects of the dark properly hit.

Fights had broken out in Greimplatz and Cyclops Square. Four traders had been robbed on the Bell Common. Refugee mobs had tried to rush the gates at the liftport and Highborn Avenue. There had been a dozen deaths at the Peelgut farms, four more at town father Wilferra's walled-in fungus-garden at the base of the Black Pile. With the water going and now the light as well, people had been afraid that the town was on its last legs and the fear had come close to being self-fulfilling.

The final straw had been an abortive riot at the water-spigot at the back of Quackstown. A lot of shouting and some punches, one or two knives and a gun drawn, and then the two watchmen by the spigot had fired a couple of shots into the air and a couple more into whoever was standing closest with a weapon still in their hands. There had been a small stampede for cover and a few more injured in that, but that really was the end of it. Within five minutes the braver citizens were back in the queue with casks and pails and cash in hand.

But it was at a water spigot the fathers owned, and that gave Tai his excuse. Guilder Tai was the too-smooth bastard I'd listened to in the bunkerhouse, and it was Tai who bullied

the town fathers into letting the Steelheads off the leash. They had cut murderously loose on the refugees right away, scattering and hounding them out of sight of the walls, then turned inward and gone to work on the town. The town watch, the real watch, had been sent up to the Black Pile to guard the fathers' cistern, and with them out of the way packs of Steelheads had simply marched from one trouble spot to another and shot anyone who fought and anyone who loitered, and then Tai had emerged from the bunkerhouse and ordered the watchmen to hang the gibbets up at Greimplatz and the three big gates and hang up any undesirables who'd survived.

For almost a whole lightson the Steelheads had been the power in Junktion, until Garm Heliko had come up through the Black Pile and the Firebrands had come in through the gates. A week ago Junktioners had seen the faces of the Firebrand leaders on bounty posters, or at least the faces of the masks that they were never supposed to take off: Master Volk, the leader, and Brother Hetch whose atrocities had put a price on his head from here to Blackenred. The Firebrands had marched up past Highdome and over the Cash Bridge and town father Stope had met them at the bunkerhouse with a proclamation in his hand. If you looked at the notice about our new town watch you could see the rough printing where the 'Wanted' section over the Cawdors' faces had been replaced.

Junktion would be a warzone soon. Hell, it was practically there already. Maybe it was time to walk away.

There was a clank from behind me, as though someone were trying the door. I listened, but nobody called out. I

shrugged, slapped water onto my face and poured a handful over my scratched chest. The cuts I had treated in Safine's caravan were healing nicely. Another swallow of Wildsnake helped me to not think about what might be happening to Safine now.

'Life in the Underhive, that's all,' I told myself aloud. My voice was a little slurred. Life in the Underhive. Things happened in the Underhive it was best not to think about. It didn't matter if you deserved them or not. Safine probably didn't deserve what happened to her. Yonni said Garm Heliko's sister and little nephew had been chased out of Highdome by a mob. They probably didn't deserve that. I don't think my sister deserved - but I was still sober enough to push that old pain out of my mind. I had walked away from that years ago.

The door rattled in its frame behind me and I yelled something half-coherent. The Wildsnake was doing more talking than I was. I helped it by drinking some more. No more knocking. Screw 'em. One of the things I liked about my rooms was the big heavy door.

The water in the bowl was grey-black and cooling to lukewarm, and the floor around the bowl was splattered with washed-away filth. I swayed for a moment, then shucked off my trousers and, with a bravado that was more booze than Kass, dumped another splash of water into the heating pan. That conversation with Nardo came back to me, something about damn rich lamplighters splashing their water around, and I giggled as I tipped the bowl out into the little gutter-drain

that ran into the far wall. I tried to say 'expensive stuff!' but it didn't come out right. Some of this was Nardo's, I tried to remind myself, but the thought was slippery and didn't stay in my head long.

The shaving mirror showed me my pale body streaked with grey where I'd more or less washed off the filth. I went to work on my gut and groin and legs, watching water almost the colour of oil pool around my feet, concentrating as hard as my drunk mind would let me. It was happening again. Garm Heliko was ebbing away through the gaps in my mind like smoke in my fingers. There was only one person I could properly bring to mind when I drank.

Tanny hadn't looked much like me. She had a heart-shaped face where mine was lean. Hair thick and dark like our mother's instead of thin and almost colourless like mine. Ruddy, vigorous complexion. I dimly remember our father having good colour in him like that, back before he took sick.

She was always a quiet one, learned to keep out of the way and take care of herself. Once our father was gone, the three of us realised we'd lost whatever little claim we might have had on the charity of the Hive City outskirts and we each had to pull our own weight if any of us were to make it. I think I even remember my mother saying that to me as we left. She was the only one of us not crying. I'd rescued what I could from father's little machine-shop, but it wasn't enough. For some reason having to leave his tools behind was still what hurt the most about leaving.

'Just walk away from it', she'd told us over and over in the



yellow-lit roadpipe. 'Just keep your eyes ahead and walk away'

We'd wandered the highest, safest stretches, keeping as close to Hive City as the House militias let us, and Tanny had learned to keep out of the way. She was too small to work and small enough to get lost or be taken. The memory keeps coming back of her brown eyes peering out of the side of a wagon or a bolthole in some dirty little town, looking out at me as we worked or walked. I used to wave to her.

The one and only humiliating time our mother resorted to outright begging we were roused by the first real Underhive gangers I'd seen. We both swore that that would never happen to us again, and started going deeper into the Underhive. I was getting better with my father's tools, and although I didn't have the swagger or the Hive City breeding to run with a gang that was no great loss. The Underhive chewed up a dozen gang-juves every day, but it had better things to offer a young man who knew juice- and circuit-work and was good with his hands. After a while Tanny was old enough to start going out on her own, trapping rats and chute-dogs the way she and I had done in the crawlways around the old 'stead. She taught herself to tan and sell the hides, learned to use a knife and to shoot the little holdout stubber I got her.

She learned brewing, too. There's always a few creds going for someone who knows how to run a still, no matter where in the Underhive you are. When life on the road started taking more out of our mother than she could spare, it was a good skill to have. We lived in a little settlement made of

cavities in the walls and ceiling over the roadpipe between Drifters' Wake and Scorchtown. Fair amount of traffic. Tanny helped serve rotgut to the gangers and traders while I tinkered with their broken kit in my little nook at the top of a ladder in the roadpipe wall.

If I knew what had happened to her it would be a lot easier. She had popped her head over the top of my ladder to see if I'd finished heat-shaping the new pipes her boss needed for the still, and stuck her tongue out at me when I told her no. She waved over her shoulder as she vaulted down the ladder and walked back under the nest of stringlights to the tunnel chopped into die pipe wall, that led to the drinking den. I know that a few minutes after that she was serving a half-bottle of Second Best to a pair of sump-gunnies who were passing through looking for bounty work. They took a shine to her, they said, and later on they were the ones who helped me try and find her.

But they didn't find anything, and neither did I, and the people who came past on the road knew nothing, and I even paid a Ratskin in money and the booze Tanny had brewed, for him to tell me that neither of the local tribal camps had seen her. She walked back across the roadpipe, her back to me, wagging her fingers over her shoulder, and there it stops. That memory. She was sixteen.

My mother went a year after that. The tiredness that had ended our travels turned out to be the white choke, picked up from some spore-rotted place along the lower trails, and never knowing about Tanny ate at her the way it did me. In the

Underhive it never pays to get too attached to people, but sometimes you can't help it. She and I hung on at that shitty little waypost, and when the choke finally took her I burned her and hit the road within a week. At least with her I knew what had happened. I'd been there at the end, holding a cup of water to her lips. I'd carried her down out of our loft.

And then I'd walked away. "Words to live by," I slurred, and giggled at the way I sounded. It was the only way you could live in the Underhive. Live light. Always be ready to walk away. I'd turned and walked away from Safine. She'd told me I could, right? So I shouldn't have stayed. I could walk away. I did. Like I walked away from Enning. Was a pity they wouldn't let him in, but there wasn't anything I could have done. I had another mouthful of 'Snake. All I could do was walk away. Not my problem. Gotta walk away.

My hands were unsteady but I managed to scrub the last of the lukewarm grime off myself with a rag, straightened as much as I could and groaned. I wasn't as clean as I wanted, but I'd done what I could. I lurched unsteadily back to my pallet and toppled onto it.

Ha. Good turn of words, that. To Harnos, wanting me to spy and report: well, I did what I could. To Nardo, lying half-broken somewhere and waiting for me to bring him his water: well, I did what I could. Safine, standing on her cart outside the Junktion gates, left with the Steelheads: I did what I could. Was it true? I didn't know. It was the kind of thing I liked to practise saying. I did the best I could. I just do my job. More than it's worth to get involved. I'm just the lamplighter, that's all.

To Tanny, vanished and gone forever somewhere downhive. I did the best I could, and then I turned and I walked away. I couldn't be blamed for that. Except in my dreams.

'Little sister', I said, lifting the bottle and taking one last little mouthful. I was always able to say that clearly, no matter how drunk I was.

This time I didn't dream.

There was a fuzzy first interval where I could make out the crack and clang of metal, but the noise didn't wake me on its own. To do that it teamed up with sudden great retches of nausea and hunger that hit me as I opened my eyes.

Repeated physical battering, fatigue, and a good hard binge of Wildsnake on top of what must have been at least two lightsons without food. From the noise and belly-cramps I was suddenly, utterly convinced that some vicious bastard of a Hive-ghost was twisting my guts in his fingers as a punishment. I'd hung onto Nardo's water ration, this flash of half-awake paranoia told me, so here was a little spook justice.

I get like this when I've had too much booze or too many Ratskin fairytales in a single sitting, and after I'd crawled back into the other room and brought up a little yellow bile into the gutter-drain the feeling ebbed somewhat. I managed a swallow of water from one of the tins (see, Kass? not that much gone after all, so much for the hive-ghost crap) and kept it down for about a minute before I brought that up too, laced

with more of the yellow. The whole lot sat in the gutter for a while - the slope Venz and I had cut into it when I moved in wasn't all it could be - and I had to sit and look at it until I had the energy to drag myself upright and back through the door.

I jumped at another clank from the door, something hitting it so hard the whole door rattled. It shouldn't have done that. My first room in Junktion had been ransacked by a trio of scummers from the rookeries, brains packed up on 'slaught and looking for tools to steal. After that I'd made sure I picked a place with a bloody strong door.

There was a rough shout from the corridor. Bad news. I looked down at myself, dizzy and naked and hung over, in a room with a gun so dirty and battered it would jam even if I had anything to load in it, and a laspistol with a dry cell. Bad, bad news.

I scabbled for clothes. Here was a question. Yell out, let them know there was someone here? Would that encourage them or the other way around?

'We hear you in there!'

Question answered. Moot point. I was dressed to the waist now. I looked at the water flasks and took a moment to shove them behind the pallet.

'We hear you! Open up, you spying thieving bastard!'

Thieving? Whatever. I didn't stop to think about it as I reached behind the loose wall panel in one corner. I only owned the two firearms but I had my choice of blades. I knew the handles by touch: the stiletto, the fat hooked flensing knife

I'd traded off a spider hunter, the sawtooth I used on cable-covers. The one I pulled out was from a weapon shop in Ghoul Bend, based on a Ratskin warknife design, a thick wedge of chopping blade the length of my forearm, fattening toward the end to give weight to a swing. I flicked it from hand to hand, then on impulse took it in my left and grabbed at my lamp-pole with my right. Nobody had undone the scavvy boss's handiwork and my boot-knife was still tightly bound to its end with a length of sinew. I felt like a Ratskin brave, tiptoeing to the door with knife and spear, my chest bare.

I jumped as the shutter clanked and rattled again. More voices on the other side of it now, a couple muffled, sounding like they were arguing. Then another, the shouting one, still shouting: 'He's got water! They all have! Get it for free! You go home and dry up and die if you want! You! Lamplighter! We know you can hear us!'

So that was it. I remembered the marks I'd seen around the lock when I'd come home.

'Open up and we won't hurt you!' The desperate cracks in the voice said that was a lie. I wondered how long I could hold out in here. This was a crowded part of Junktion, plenty of other homes along this same passageway. How long before someone else came along? If a fight started, that would be my chance. Unless it was people from the surrounding boltholes who were trying to hammer in my door now.

At least they didn't seem very well-equipped. They didn't have anything that could cut or blast. But I felt equally naked, and not just because I hadn't put on a shirt. I remembered

Safine and her gangwomen. Respirator masks, belts of reloads, pistols, knives, pouches of grenades, climbing-spikes, clip-harnesses, darkvisors... Sometimes we settlement types forgot what sort of walking armouries the successful gangers turned into.

That memory brought a bit of anger back again. I hadn't been dragged through the badzones and repeatedly half-killed just to get done over in my own home.

I ground my teeth and twisted my globulb to extinguish it. Then I stepped to one side of the shutter door, found the bolt lever by touch with my toes and pushed it with my foot.

There was just enough time after the bolts thunked back to make me think of all the ways this could be a mistake. I suddenly remembered the smoke bomb that had chased Thamm out of her own place, or the trick the Ratskins had of pouring a bag of chew-roaches into boltholes where their enemies were. Who said they were going to come in where I could get them?

But they did. After a moment the shutter squealed and grated open by half a metre and a hand and gun poked in. Flattened against the wall, I waited.

'It's dark,' someone said.

'Get in there, gutless!' came the shouter's voice and the hand and gun turned into a gangly man with a paunch, staggering through the doorway. The man who'd shoved him moved into the gap, his own chunky stub pistol poking through the way the first one had.

I brought the cleaver blade down on his wrist and went most of the way through it. The pistol dropped to the floor and went off, and in the chorus of ricochets from around my walls I doubled myself up into a ball as the luckless first man took a crease through his hip. He spun and yelled, spinning around trying to see around him, and I lunged and put the knife-spear through his neck.

He choked for a second and crumpled, and I pulled the pole loose. My chopping-knife was still embedded in one of my attackers but I lunged again and grabbed up the gun as the door rattled the rest of the way open.

I back-pedalled past the pallet as the bellowing man with my cleaver in his wrist was shoved aside. Then I dived and shotgun pellets stung my back as the main blast shredded my bedding. Head ringing, I sat up and fired twice into the knot of bodies outside the doorway. The man I'd cut took most of the bullets' punch but what impact they had left, and the spray from their eruption from chop-hand's shoulder, was enough to drive the shotgunner back against the far wall.

A hand popped around the doorframe and an autopistol burst struck the shelf over my head, shattering a plastic toolcase and bouncing my spare heating-pan onto the floor with a row of small-bore holes chewed into it. I grabbed the water-flasks in a bear-hug and rolled into the other room, around the corner and out of their fire.

For a few seconds, anyway. I had one little stub pistol and a spear I'd have to reach out and pull loose from gangly-man's neck, they had autoweapons and cover. All they needed was



to poke a barrel around the doorframe and pop off bursts until they winged me. The realisation that it was only a matter of time made me sick all over again.

Open the door so you can fight. Right. Nice work, Kass.

# 9: QUACKSTOWN

'I know what you're after!'

The shout cleared my throat almost before I knew I was going to speak. My knuckles were white on the grip of the pistol.

Nothing happened for a beat.

'I know you want the water!' Were they listening? I couldn't hear any movement. 'I've got a stubber pointed at the flasks right now! The instant, the spitting instant that I see a gun-barrel come around that doorframe a bullet goes through them and you've done all this for nothing!'

A long pause. I didn't hear anyone reloading, or any voices. Eventually, when they did speak, they spoke at once, talking over one another.

'What if we take that chance?' from one;

'You wouldn't dare risk it!' from the other.

'You think I won't?' I yelled back in answer to both of them. 'You think I'm dumb enough to think you'll let me live once you're in here? What have I got to lose except for the chance to spite you out of what you came for?'

That's not your water, you grovelling bastard! All Junktion knows what you people are up to - in with the town fathers, nice and cosy. Do you even know what being thirsty feels like?

Now more than ever with this hangover, but the thought and

the urge to giggle at it were gone in a half-second.

'It's part of my pay, if you were too stupid to think of that.' This was insane. Why was I arguing with them? 'What do you think I am, some kind of water-scavy? Last lightson some real scawies almost killed me for the job I do for this town, by the way, and so thank you for the way you appreciate it, you sumpsack.'

'Don't get into it, Auvin, let's work out a way to finish him and get gone.' The second voice, not even trying to stay low. 'You know we won't let you live, Kass, and we know we can't walk away without a bullet between our shoulders. And there's two of us, better placed than you. How brave are you now?'

'Auvin?' I called out. Azer Auvin? The Cyclops Square smokehouse? What the hell are you doing acting like some badzone mugger? Half the people in Junktion buy meat off you.' Any time bought was good time. I was checking the load in the stubber and trying to work how quickly I could get through the door and get the pistol out of gangly-man's hand.

'Like you don't know. Your friends in the bunkerhouse own it all now, there are guards on all the spigots. Probably doesn't matter to someone who just carts his water home for free. You probably don't care what they're charging.'

I was filling my lungs to shout out something else, something about just doing my job and minding my business, when Auvin gave a yell of alarm and there was a flurry of autoshots. I took my chance by reflex, scrambling back into my big room to grab at the dropped pistol as a fight broke out in the corridor outside. I got my hand around it just as the

corridor filled with smoking, roaring light.

It was nothing like the flamers I'd seen used around Junktion before. Not a drizzly stream of sticky burning liquid, but a blinding gas-jet playing across the corridor, scorching flesh into ash. The shotgunner managed one brief scream that was drowned out by the rapid bangs of his shells cooking off. The man I'd cut writhed for a few seconds and then was just smoke and bones, and the men at the doorway, Auvin and his companion, got about five steps before steps and screams stopped.

I didn't move, but my hand tightened on the pistol. I knew who used flamers like that.

After Auvin's death-cry it seemed a long time before his killer filled the doorway. I stood and met the Firebrand eye to eye while his flamer covered me. He walked a step into the room. Another. His mask was a black rat-hide hood, cut to expose his mouth, multiple thicknesses of hide around the eye-slit and brow to give the appearance of glowering. He had no visible neck: the mask buckled into a high leather collar, making his head a single tapering black shape from his shoulder up. A design had been painted near the hood's rounded crown, a crude skeletal hand gripping a burning torch.

I had seen that mask before, on the bounty posters on the column inside the liftport gate. Brother Hetch. Brother Hetch the murderer and pyre-lighter. Brother Hetch, the Redemptionist bogeyman. Brother Hetch, Junktion watchman. I surprised myself by managing to look him levelly in the eye.

A moment after that he jammed the hot muzzle of the flamer into my chest, making me yell and clutch at my singed skin.

'Cover yourself. Cover your chest and face. You shame yourself and mark yourself.' His voice was gravelly and his breathing heavy. 'When you can be looked on without shame, come outside. You have business and orders.' He turned to go, moving stiffly on the crude bionic leg I'd heard about in the stories with its flat star-shaped pad for a foot. The foot clinked against something, and he looked down. It was my bottle of Wildsnake, still a third full.

Hetch lifted his metal foot and crunched the bottle to slivers and sparkles of broken glass. My feet stung from cuts and alcohol as I picked up my boots and coat and the Firebrands watched me and sneered.

I wasn't horrified any more, just tired and hungry and grim. I had a feeling I'd worked through all the horror when I'd seen the Firebrands' work in Chartists' Alley. Looking at them now, I couldn't believe Stope thought these people were his friends.

They had the ganger swagger about them, and the smell of burned bodies and my neighbours' shutter-doors clanging shut as they passed seemed to fuel it. I was carrying a re-wrapped water flask in my arms, as well as a knife and the two-tone and my las, for whatever those last two would do for me in their current state. My only working firearm was the fat little stubber I'd grabbed, and three of its six rounds were gone. I clung to the little gun as I made my awkward way down

the series of ladders that took us to the street.

I looked over my shoulder as we came up and out of the cliff-face of my crumbling hab-block, but I couldn't see anyone watching us go. The front rooms were bright with cheap lanterns and the flicker of cooking fires, but the block was quiet and not many people moved on the trails. Then the view was blocked by the broad chest of the flamer man and I was shoved again. His metal foot thumped softly in the dust as he walked along behind me and I could hear the igniter-light inside the flamer nozzle hissing. I felt safer with three Firebrands around me than I had with Auvin's water-raiders outside my door, but not by a whole lot at all.

Azer Auvin had enough money to run not one but three fighters at the Brass Pit. I thought about that as we came up on the sign pointing down the Pit trail. Three fighters was something when your competition was town fathers and Guilders. How could someone like Auvin not afford water now?

'Clean yourself.'

Hetch's hoarse voice, still behind me. I stopped and looked at him.

'Clean yourself. Show that you're fighting it. Fighting the taint.'

'Are you talking about the Brass Pit?'

'I'm talking about where you people come together to trade flesh and gamble and, I'm told, saturate your brains with drink and poison. Show me you're capable of acting cleanly.'

Was this the time to make a stand? No it was not. I made a clumsy imitation of the spread-fingered gesture the Firebrands had performed at the sign. There was another shove to my shoulder and we were off again.

'Are you guarding me as a lamplighter or as a prisoner?' We were walking along the canal bank where I'd been attacked about a hundred lifetimes ago, and the thought that I'd come out of that alive gave me the courage to ask the question. The lamps I'd extinguished were still dark, the others were dim or dead. The wick-burners would have used up their fuel long ago. Above us I could see stablight beams sweeping the slopes of the Pile.

'You're already a prisoner,' said Hetch from behind me. 'A prisoner of the rot you invited into yourself. I weep for you that you never learned what you have to do to redeem yourself and die whole.' He didn't sound as though he were weeping. 'You'll be thankful for the day we came to your town. We will make this place better. Cleaner. The way we have made ourselves cleaner.' The Firebrand next to me held out his arms. The skin was thick with scar tissue, layers of burn- and scourge-marks. I didn't doubt they were self-inflicted.

He hadn't answered my question, but when I veered away from the 'platz toward Quackstown they followed me instead of shoving me, so I guessed it was an escort rather than an arrest after all.

Quackstown wasn't much more salubrious than I

remembered it last time I'd visited Nardo. Soiled Creek, the chain of pools and culverts that ran through the middle of it, had dried up like everything else. Now it was just a series of depressions crusted with dead algae and old chem slicks, and whatever decayed or corroded rubbish had been floating in it. I saw two human bodies sprawled face down in the creekbed, both obviously dead, and wondered how desperate you had to be to try to drink from Soiled Creek. The half-dead stringlights over the bridges made everything look livid, rotted.

There were stirrings and mutterings in the humpies and half-ruined rooms we passed. The only proper buildings in Quackstown were along the sides of the Creek, and out beyond those it was mostly rubble and half-ruins, old trashed habs and plant. Hanging from every building was a dizzying mess of signs and shingles, advertising the people who gave Quackstown its name: fortune-tellers, fake Ratskin spirit healers, scribes, apothecaries who had probably never set eyes on a genuine Hive City-made medpack but charged as though they'd invented them. We passed a tattered sign claiming its owner would, for a fee, dowse out lost archeotech hoards using an ancient Ratskin amulet. In the quiet the sound of Hetch's metal foot was almost hypnotic.

That lasted until shouts and screams from ahead of us wrecked the silence. I blinked for a moment, then pushed into a run: Nardo's rooms were just around the corner, but I cannoned into the back of the Firebrand in front of me who whirled and planted a spread hand in my face.

You go at no pace but ours. That we follow you into this



cesspits is bad enough. We'll be burning our souls clean for days. You'll not run us into an ambush.' I swallowed hard, waited for his hand to return to his side, and jittered as the three of them closed me in even tighter and walked more slowly than before.

Ahead there was a burst of laughter and the crash of sheet metal. I danced about trying to see what was going on past the shoulders of the Firebrand in front of me, and of course it was exactly what I'd been afraid of.

The sloping hatch-doors down to Nardo's below-street rooms were thrown open and one of them was off its hinges. A little crowd had assembled outside them, shouting and calling, and under their feet I saw a litter of debris getting scattered and trampled. Blankets, smashed boxes, eating gear, torn clothes. I recognised some of Nardo's stuff.

The steps of the Firebrands sped up and I got another shove, out to the side and into the middle of the little street. I waited for them to close in and do what town deputies are supposed to, reef and shove

them back, shout them down, crease a skull if they have to. But of course these were Volk's Firebrands.

The flamer gave a single incandescent cough of that white gas again and there were howls as clothes were scorched away from backs that were suddenly black and blistering. In perfect ganger sync, the scattergunner stepped forward behind the fire-jet, calmly aiming his sawnoff. He'd loaded hotshot shells, man-cookers, that popped in the middle of the crowd with more flames, bright enough to hurt Underhive eyes

and light up the crowd as they screamed and began running. The pistolier, the man who'd shown me his mutilated arms, began roaring something half-coherent as the crowd tried to scatter, something about standing proud and the courage to repent, and then he was firing into their backs. He cut down at least seven men and women and then panted as he drew a long single-edged sword and walked forward to finish off the injured.

Later I would wonder about the people that went out under his sword-blade or the axe that the scattergunner unslung to join in the work, wonder if they were anyone I knew. There was a medicine-grinder in the Town who'd done me a tonic that had stopped my skiffer-cough. A scribe who'd rented me a hallway to sleep in when I first came to Junktion and written out my letter of petition to the town fathers for me. Some others.

But that was later. Right then all those shapes in the street were people who'd tried to get at my friend, and I hugged the flask under one arm, thumb-cocked the pistol with the other and sprinted across the street.

I was lucky not to crack my head on the top of the door frame as I dropped in, or to snap an ankle on the badly-packed dirt floor. This was a little square cellar-hall that linked the street with half a dozen other rooms that had once been storage cells. Squinting in the dark, I could see lights and hear voices from Nardo's broken-in doorway.

I had taken three steps when a single whimper from next to me made me whirl, pistol twitching. It was a woman, not much out of girlhood, with another little girl clutched in her arms,

cringing away from me. In a stray flash of torchbeam from the door I saw her legs were twisted with a string of old, bad breaks. It must have been why she hadn't run. Around her, as my eyes adapted, I could see makeshift beds and little piles of possessions. Nardo had said three families paid for the right to share the cellar.

I shook my head at the woman: no further noise. She understood and hugged her face down into the little girl's. I left them like that and stepped to the door.

Nardo's face, in the yellow-white circle of a torch-beam. His right eye was closed and crusted, his nose broken, his lips split and swollen. That was the old injuries. A knife-tip was grating across his forehead, making a new one.

The man squatting down over him was heavy, slope-shouldered, just a dark lump in the back-glow of the torch but his hair and beard as pale as mine.

'No water.' That was Nardo. His ruined mouth made his usual mutter glue-thick. Told all o' you.'

'Filthy lying rat,' rumbled the fat man almost gently. 'Now here's the thing. We know you people are clever. You're clever, quick people. Aren't you clever and quick? And it doesn't please me to believe that you're not so clever and quick that you aren't holding water out on us the way the fathers are. It pleases me to believe that the only thing that all those others didn't do was be persistent enough.' All those others. Oh, Hiveghosts, Nardo, I'm sorry.

Nardo was shaking his head. The knife-point moved another centimetre and I saw him bleed.

I could see the fat man's accomplice. It was a woman, wrapped in strips of dark cloth strung with Ratskin charms and broken fragments of tech. Someone from Quackstown. I crashed my shoulder into her, hard and low so she couldn't absorb it by bending over. She flew across the little space in a screeching tangle of limbs and lank black hair and they all wound up in a pile, Nardo, she and fat-man. Fat-man flailed the knife and grabbed at a holster on his thigh and I stepped all the way into the room, put the little stubber in his face and painted the wall behind him. Half a step back to bring to bear on the woman. I wanted to tell her to get gone, but she snarled and whipped a saw-wire at my face.

Somehow the second stub-shot seemed much louder than the first one.

I pulled them off him, the man and the woman, as Nardo groaned with pain underneath them and the ugly voices of the Firebrands muttered to one another outside. Then I picked up fat-man's torch and looked at the stubber. One round left. I supposed I should have tried to use the knife. Or let the Firebrands do what Stope was paying them for. Somehow I was glad I'd done it the way I had.

'Got any cups unbroken?' I wasn't very good at being comforting. I was hoping being businesslike would do. At the sound of my voice Nardo tried to sit up, dropped back with a groan and shook his head.

I didn't know if that meant no or don't know. I fanned the

torch around. Most of the stuff in Nardo's trunks was already scattered through here and out and up into the street. I saw his fast-cycle lasrifle lying by the end of the bed, smashed against the door until it was bent almost to a right-angle; there was no sign of the heavy custom-balanced autos that he'd prized so much.

There was a metal mug, though, trodden on and dented but able to hold water. I splashed a drop into it and held it to his lips while he coughed. Eventually enough trickled down his throat for his belly to make a start on.

Tell me. Everythin'.'

I sneaked a look out into the cellar but I couldn't see the Firebrands. I scooped down the wall next to Nardo's cot - his room was just wide enough that I could sit cross-legged between that and the wall, and I began to tell him.

I told him about killing the men who attacked me on the trail, and about Thamm still choking for life in a little sawbones' room somewhere, and about Venz and Mudeye (he closed his eyes for a moment when he heard about them, and we sat in silence for a few moments. Then I gave him another swallow of water and we went on). I told him about being sent out on the Tarvo trail, Heliko's assassins coming after me, fleeing from them into the rats and the scawies, the Curse and the standoff at the gates. I dropped my voice and kept my tone flat when I told him that the Firebrands and the Steelheads had been installed at the top of the pile of town deputies. I told him about the men who'd tried to break in on me and my idea that Azer Auvin and his cronies probably weren't the first.

And I told him why they'd brought in the Firebrands as well as the Steelheads. I told him about Garm Heliko.

\* \* \*

The town fathers' private water stash was kept in the cistern at the very top of the Black Pile, in the same wired-in compound as the big Spyglass watchtower. That fed the spigot behind Quackstown where the riot had been, and after that the fathers had got scared and closed off the spigot, no matter what anyone from the town was willing to pay. That water was theirs.

'Remember Mudeye's theories?' I asked, and Nardo nodded. Everyone knew that underneath the Black Pile was just that, a great heap of rubble and a maze of little craters and cavities. Mudeye had dreamed of pouring dye into some of the bigger holes and prowling around the levels under Junktion trying to see if any of it ran through. His dreams about lost and forgotten levels stuffed with archeotech and pearl spores and who knew what got more extravagant every time he cornered someone to talk about them.

Garm Heliko had had the same idea.

He'd assembled a team from whoever out there he was leading now, bandits and scummers and men from Junktion's outskirts desperate with thirst. Yonni had known some names. A freed pit-fighter named Marezk who liked to get in close

with a ram-hammer and sawnoff. A small-time leg-breaker for one of the gambling dens named Ghilolla who they said could throw a grenade clear across Cyclops Square. Spiders-Fear-Him, a renegade Ratskin scout from Scrubtangle. Others. Nine in all. The rats alone knew how but they had managed to do what Mudeye had always talked about. They had wriggled through those crushing little spaces up through the Black Pile, worked their way to the surface inside the compound and tried to take the cistern.

The first watchmen didn't have a chance. They were walking the fence and scanning the lower slopes of the Pile with heatseer lenses. It was how the watch had spotted the attack on me. But nobody was ready for an attack from inside.

It would've been wiser to stay quiet, Yonni had said, seal off the cistern and then dictate terms. Would he have got away with it? Hard to know. It wasn't what he did. Yonni had thought they were too strung out by then, from thirst and the ordeal of dragging themselves up through whatever horror-filled little stone gullets they'd found under the Pile. So Heliko's gang drew on the first guards they saw. Their weapons weren't silenced. It was on in a second.

One salvo of pistol shots. Two dead. Guards running around the cistern, but they're looking the wrong way and instantly they're under fire too. Three more down, and Heliko and his gang are grabbing up their longarms. A few seconds for the watchers up the Spyglass to grasp what's going on and bring their scopes to bear on the foot of the tower.

Now Heliko's in the reservoir plant, between the big rockcrete cisterns and in among the tangle of valves and pipes. The guards know it's more than their skins are worth to fire in and break those. One, a lanky ex-pro prospector named Frogeld, gets out a hand flamer and tries to crawl in through the machinery on one flank while the others fire close over the pipes as a diversion. A burst of yellow flame that they later found had got two of them, but one of the burning men falls crosswise between the pipes and blocks the way. Frogeld can't get further in and as he's trying to back up, Ghilolla rolls a fragger in under him and there's nowhere much for the shrapnel to go but into Frogeld.

('Bad way t'go', said Nardo when I repeated that part, and I nodded. That second or two of lying there looking at the grenade in front of your face and the knowing that there's no way you'll ever be clear in time...)

The grenade blast makes the guards get serious. The sentries up in die Spyglass are spotlighting the rebels they can see and trying to get a bead, but long-range sharpshooting isn't really an Underhive thing and they can't get a shot that won't burst a pipe or smash a pump. Heliko's people are working themselves as far into the pipeworks as they can, but they can see it's starting to turn, see that now they've trapped themselves.

Someone spots the light from a hot-torch. Heliko's either trying to cut into some of the pipes or weld them shut. That tears it with the guards, at any rate: better the pipes get broken in a firefight than cut apart while they just watch.



Two watchmen angle a launcher and start skating fraggers of their own off the sides of the reservoir, trying to blow them over the rebels' heads to either drive them out or force them down. Ghilolla manages to field one and send it back, going long and over the fence and blowing a hole in the side of the Pile. Then he throws his own up and out of the pipes, two deadly accurate casts that break up the skirmish line that was advancing on the cisterns. Spiders-Fear-Him uses one of the dead sentries' autoguns - kills three of them as they fall back. They try and return fire, but a Ratskin who's had time to set up and conceal himself? They can barely even make out where the shots are coming from.

The sentries with the launcher have had time to get smart and climb up the Spyglass tower. Now they balance there, aim by the spotlights, and drop a choker grenade just behind Ghilolla, who must have had a grenade ready, because a second later an explosion lofts Ghilolla's body up out of cover and into one of the cisterns. And then the rest of them rush the pipework again.

The big gangs like the Berserkers and the Curse aren't the only ones with gorgeous hardware. The men who watch the town fathers' water are well kitted. Half a dozen guards enter the maze of pipes with photovisors over their eyes and respirators over their mouths. The choker fumes don't bother them any more than the eye-stabbing bursts of light from the flashbombs that are starting to come down from the grenade team.

The choker and the blast spoil Spiders-Fear-Him's aim and

in a moment the guards are in the pipes. There's a burst of wild firing as two blinded rebels go crazy at the sound of the guards' steps, but a couple of carefully-angled las-shots end that. Another guard gets too keen and runs down a catwalk and straight in between Marezk with his ram-hammer and Spiders-Fear-Him with his machete. He's Junktion's last fatality of the fight.

Marezk and the Ratskin split up, and the guards can hear Marezk calling the other rebels to back him up as he goes hunting. None of them do, and Marezk starts cursing the others and then just screaming in rage as he realises he's being left on his own. He manages to burst a valve assembly with the ram-hammer and bring out a gusher of water and then a frantic nothing-to-lose salvo from the nearest two guards takes him out of the picture.

Three unaccounted for, then. One miserable bastard left trapped in a dead end, trying to claw his way up a sheer bank of pipes and yelling Heliko's name over and over until the guards club him down and drag him off, and the Ratskin and Heliko himself. Nobody knows where they escaped to.

And within ten hours of the last shots being fired in the compound, the fathers are declaring that Volk's Firebrands will be part of the Junktion watch.

It seemed like I'd been talking for a long time. Nardo had managed to sit up a little and pour himself a cup of water. He tried a yawn but flinched with pain in the middle of it and put a hand over his face. At least two of his teeth had been broken. 'It's bad.'

'It is,' I said. 'And I think it's going to get worse.' Hetch's harsh laugh from the door made us both jump.

'Don't you worry yourselves, either of you. You keep yourselves pure and follow your Redemption and we will see to it that things are better for you with every lightson. Break yourselves and remake yourselves. We will show you.'

Hetch stepped in and stood over me. His weapon was slung back over his shoulder and his eyes glittered in the torchlight.

You spin a pretty story, lamplighter, but you're done with it now. Stand up and collect yourself. It's time to go.'

# 10: TOVICK AND HETCH

I didn't know what he was talking about until I remembered him jamming the flamer into my chest and rasping at me. What was it?

'Orders and business, do I remember it right? Duty calls.'

'You can't understand duty in the way we do,' he answered without missing a beat, 'but you can follow our lead and example. You'll see us start to scorch this town clean.'

I wasn't sure how that followed from what I'd asked him, but did I mention that the Red Redemption makes people crazy? I stood up.

'What's the business, exactly? Something from Stope?'

Town father Stope understands that this place needs us. He helped us strengthen ourselves in the badzones and he's brought us here to grow stronger still.'

'Good for him.' I looked down at Nardo cradling the water flask on his chest. His head had sunk down so his chin was practically next to it. What's your plan to make sure my friend is safe?'

'Compassion is the spoor that the prey leaves for the hunter,' sneered Hetch. We have grown out of and above compassion into purity of purpose.'

'Good for you, and good for your purity of purpose. What's your plan to make sure my friend is safe?' My chest was still tender where the flamer had scorched it but my mouth ran

right on nevertheless. It was like the scavy boss all over again.

Disgust showed in Hetch's voice. Maybe he knew who I'd just compared him to.

'Our business, lamplighter, is bringing you to the bunkerhouse, armed and ready. We've already indulged your delay.' I didn't like the sound of armed and ready, but it did give me an idea of a new tack to take.

'Bunkerhouse armed and ready it is. Now, as proper Junktion watchmen doing your duty to town father Stope, what plans do you have to make sure that Lamplighter Nardo is kept safe until he can recover from his injuries and take up his tools for the city again?'

The eyes in the mask-slit looked down to Nardo and back to me.

'He should embrace them. His wounds.' Was the grating voice just a touch less confident? 'Pain is what redeems. "If it doesn't hurt, it doesn't count." Do you know who said that?'

'No.' Adding that I didn't care didn't seem like the thing to do right now. Hetch's thick-gloved hands were in fists. 'Here's what I'm tasking you with in my capacity as the last Junktion lamplighter.' Nardo made to say something at that and I nudged him with my heel. 'I'll come with one of you to the Greimplatz to a gunnery there to get armed, then I'll feed, and then you'll escort me to the bunkerhouse because then I'll be armed and ready. Two of you are going to get my - get Lamplighter Nardo to the rooms you fetched me from. He can stay there with his water ration and mine.'

Hetch's eyes had narrowed until I could barely see them. I wondered if I'd pushed them too far. I put on my cards face. Cawdors didn't play cards, did they? I was pretty sure that was a burning offence with them.

Then suddenly he was gone back into the dimness, and I heard that grating voice passing on orders to the others. I dropped down beside Nardo and whispered urgently to him.

'You can't stay here. More and more people are going to get the same idea about lamplighters and water stashes. My place is better, people were banging on my door for hours but the bastards couldn't get in.' I pulled out the cord with the deadbolt keys over my head and hung it on Nardo's neck, and he stiffly tucked the keys down the front of his bloodied shirt. You rest until I get back and then we'll work out what we're going to do. These crazies-' I shot a look back over my shoulder as I helped him up 'these crazies are playing along to Stope. I think they're just sizing the place up and getting themselves ready. But as long as they're playing along we can take advantage.' I shut up as I heard footsteps, stepped aside and let the two junior Firebrands push past me. With poor grace, they began helping Nardo up.

The broken-legged girl was sitting in the street as we came out of the cellar doors. Her head was slumped and for a moment until I saw her breathing she could have been one of the scatter of corpses that still ringed the door. I looked over at her and she mouthed the word 'water' at me, but Nardo had

everything I'd brought with me, the whole flask.

The flamer-Cawdor caught me looking at her and misunderstood. He waved a gloved hand at her gnarled legs.

We do not suffer the mutant, as you won't either. We brought her out here while you were telling your little stories so we could do our good clean work. Next time I expect you to come with us and learn.'

'You were seeing if her legs were mutated or hurt.'

'Crushed in a rubble-fall, so she says, and we examined them. We agreed to accept her account. She is not mutant.'

I thought about that for a moment, the picture in my mind of the girl and her child propped up against the wall. The three Firebrands looming over her, prodding at her legs, talking amongst themselves, deciding if they were going to burn her or not.

I stopped and put a hand on the shoulder of the Firebrand in front of me, the one with Nardo's right arm over his shoulders. He gave a hiss of breath and looked at Hetch for guidance, but it only took me a second to fish the water-flask out of the crude blanket-sling hanging around Nardo's neck. I wanted to reassure Nardo there would be more in my rooms but I didn't dare while we could be overheard - I hated to think how much worse that would make it. He'd have to trust me.

I poured out a cupful, pushed the flask back into place and carried it back. The girl was able to drink it with only a little coughing: half the cup, then a quarter for her own girl, then a quarter again for her. She tried to meet my eyes as I stood up

but I avoided her gaze. I hoped the dead around us were all strangers to her but I didn't like the chances.

The dirty, nasal laughter from up above made me jump and flinch.

'Look down here for the laaadieees!' I craned my head back. There were lamps hanging halfway up the walls of the building-front opposite and I had to move before I could see anything past even that dim orange glow. What I could see was a shaved head shining like the metal that gleamed from its ears and lips, and a crest of hair sculpted into spikes. Watch the ladies scramble about! Watch them cry tears for each other! Poor little pets!' The voice laughed again and another head and another voice joined it.

'Poor little poppets got to take care of one another, now. Poor little bruised mite. Are off to drink mothers' milk, now, are we? Do we need to be made into men, now?'

'Brother Hetch?' asked one of the Firebrands. There was no fear in his voice. All three of them were staring up at the two Steelheads who were leaning over the edge of the roof to taunt us.

'Afraid, little ratkins? Running away from us?'

You going to take all our fun away, are you?'

'Little lighter there had a lot of visitors! Nice little party to watch! We've been laughing!' And they suited actions to words. Their heads disappeared from view as they threw them back to laugh, and there was a crack as one of them got exuberant enough to fire a pistol into the air. From behind me



there were quiet metallic sounds as the Firebrands brought their weapons to bear. I turned my head one way, then the other, and in my peripheral vision I could see them: they had let Nardo slide down to his knees and their guns were held high in hands that didn't so much as twitch.

The Steelheads appeared again, leering down at us. They had to be able to see the Firebrands' weapons, but they didn't show it, not right away. They let it look like coincidence, the way that there were suddenly heavy, lumpish Goliath pieces in their hands. One of them had a dot-sight: every so often a dim red showed where the beam caught a drift of smoke. I could see one of them licking his lips as his gun nuzzled the air, then froze in place. He'd found a bead on one of the Firebrands behind me.

'Nice town you've got here, lighters!' whooped the lip-licker. 'Hope you don't mind a few more parties when the water's back on!'

Nobody wanted to move. I tried to decide whether to move or talk - which would make it worse? There was no Safine to send me safely away here (and I felt a quick thrill of shame at the thought). The Goliaths' grins were growing feral, and I could hear a Firebrand behind me starting to pant for breath.

'We'll...' my first word came out as a croak. 'We'll see about it when the water's on. For now, we've got lighters' business. No fun partying in the dark.'

A stupid line, but it did what I wanted it to: it didn't stir up the Steelheads and the Firebrands had an out, a way to leave without damage to their dignity that they'd need to start

shooting to salvage. Gangers and their strutting, spitting pride. The Steelheads whooped and cackled from the wall and fired into the air again as the Firebrands backed away, reluctantly lowered their guns and hoisted Nardo up again.

Card-player face. Card-player face. I tried to make their words into meaningless noises as I walked away. I didn't let myself think about the so-called town deputies that had sat up there and watched as pack after pack had ransacked Nardo's room for water and beat him because there was no water to find. My hand was on the little stubber, but the stumpy barrel was only good at almost point-blank and there was only one bullet anyway. What was the point?

I was walking slowly, shoulders hunched as if I still expected a Goliath bullet in my back, and Nardo and the Firebrands disappeared ahead down the dim street. Brother Hetch walked next to me, silently but with a satisfied air, as though a point had been proven.

Ask me if I've ever been grateful for the presence of a House Cawdor gunman before or since the Dry Season and I'll tell you the truth, which is no. But I'd be lying to say that Brother Hetch didn't make himself welcome twice over between there and Greimplatz. The first time when we held our breath to walk over the little causeway over the dried-up creek and there were three scummers blocking our way. The biggest of them had time to get out 'you got water, we seen you g-' before the nozzle of Hetch's flamer came up and the

three of them bolted. Hetch sent a bark of flame after them but it couldn't have made them run faster than they already were.

The second time was when the flophaired little bastard let us into the Gunnery and sneered at me. He was halfway through a taunt not a hundred degrees off the sort of thing the Steelheads had been yelling down at us as we left Quackstown when Hetch stepped through the door behind me, spun the kid round and pinned him face-first against the wall.

'See? Poison coming out of his system,' he told me, gesturing at the sore on the back of the kid's neck with the still-hissing flamer nozzle. 'I don't doubt it shows in his actions. You, litde man, would do well to build on this. Scourging and fasting will clean you even faster until this-' he pinched the back of the kid's neck with his fingers and got a yell '-runs dry and your spirit is lifted. You may be ready for a mask before this lamplighter-man is, if you're diligent.'

The kid yelled for Tovick, thrashed as Hetch let him go and almost overbalanced. It was me he set eyes on as he got his footing back, and he gave me a quick death-glare before he loped across the shop and disappeared. Tovick led me around the counter to his workbench without comment and laid the weapons out. I tried not to laugh - I could see the sourness on Tovick's face and I knew for him this was serious. A lamplighter turning up with one of Volk's Firebrands who was roughing up the help. But every time I tried to stop grinning the kid's squawks started up in my head ('Awwwwk! Awwwuukk!') and I had to make myself not giggle. When

you've been dragged through the shit it's usually the first little thing you come across afterwards that sets you off.

Hetch didn't bother to follow us. He slung the flamer and prowled about the shop, letting us know his opinion of the stock with an occasional loud snort. Tovick glowered at my gear and worked in silence, stripping and cleaning and charging. I knew weapon tinkering as well as most in town but with what the guns had been through the last couple of lightsons I didn't trust myself. Competent wasn't good enough, and since I was coming here anyway, why not get an expert. The clicks and clinks of his tools were reassuring.

'Can you talk in front of your boss?' Tovick asked me after a while. His voice was flat and quiet and I kept mine likewise.

'Not my boss. Bodyguard. Town deputy. Stope...'

'Stope's a fungus-gutted fool, everybody knows it. He personally waved these bastards through the gates.'

'I know, I know, I've had run-ins with both of them, believe it. Just be careful for a while. The Firebrands are Stope's special friends.' Tovick grimaced, his head still down.

'Never been a nice town, Kass, but never like this before. What happens next then? I suppose you know.' There it was again.

'I don't know spit, Tovick.' I was suddenly conscious of the effort it took to keep my voice down to a hiss. Suddenly it seemed important to explain this to someone, anyone. I respected Tovick. 'Half the spitting town seems to think all the lighters were halfway to being town fathers, Tovick. It's not

bloody true, but nobody cares. I used to think people liked having us around, but every third person here acts like it was me who came and took their water off them.' Across the shop, Hetch was staring at me over a drum of belted stubber rounds. He couldn't have heard the words but he had picked up the tone.

'I've been spending my time getting dragged around and yelled at and attacked for my water ration - which I earn, Tovick, I earn it from the town, and shoved back and forth by-' I shot a look over to Hetch '-spitting watch-gangers that some unhinged idiot saw fit to deputise. That's when I'm not getting sent out to be hunted by rats and scavies.' I shoved my scabbed and battered palms under his nose. 'And people act like I'm some kind of insider who's helping all this along out of spite. All I'm trying to do is the job I get paid for. That's the all and only of it. Just my job.'

Tovick hadn't stopped working. His fingers moved as smoothly as a spider's mandibles picking a rat or a bat apart, as Safine's gripping a weapon, as mine when there were tools in them and a juice-cord or a lamp laid out underneath. He put my laspistol, now clean and glistening with oil, on a shelf over the bench and reached for the two-tone.

'So how about the Gartch's convoy?' he asked. I was silent for a moment, wrong-footed, as Tovick just kept his head down and his hands moving. 'Is that one of the things you don't hear about? You going to tell me you weren't asked to look around by the fathers?'

So of course I had to lean there on his bench and look at

my feet eat and swallow every word of my great big speech. It tasted like bitter-burned ash. I thought about standing in the bunkerhouse and trying to answer the fathers' questions until I almost dropped. I thought about Yonni shifting and cursing and finally saying he could trust me with the news that Gartch wasn't coming back with water at all. The thoughts stung. Was I really what Tovick was saying I was?

At the back of my head, a little voice said Junktion's done. Time to ship out. Let it drop and just walk away.

'How many people are waiting on Gartch?' I asked and regretted it.

'Who isn't?' Tovick came back levelly. 'Lot of people going to be at the gate when he comes back from the Hook. There's even talk about cashing up a second caravan, Guilder chips and water rations hired the Berserkers as guards.' I felt my eyes widening. The Berserkers were almost as reclusive as the Curse.

Gartch's caravan went right out of my head again.

'Caravans. There's water at Shining Falls. Who's buying it? I mean-' I caught myself and slowed down. The Curse came down out of Shining Falls last lightson.' That finally got him to look up.

'Last? You took too many knocks to the head out there, Kass, try two whole lightsons ago. They headed back up the trail at least twenty hours back.' I'd taken longer to sleep everything off than I thought. A lot longer. I thought about Nardo, lying in his room, at the mercy of whoever next decided to kick in his door, while I lay in a drunken stupor with his water

ration.

And while the Steelheads who were supposed to be in the watch looked on and laughed. That was better. Someone I could be angry at who wasn't me.

'Why did they leave?' I asked.

'Why?' Tovick asked mildly. They had no water left. The Steelheads took a tithe.'

'How much of a tithe?' I was afraid of the answer.

The way I heard it, Kass, there was a gate-gang tithe that the Steelheads kept for themselves. Then there was the standard Junktion water-tithe, that's the traditional one that the town fathers brought in a dozen lightsons ago if you remember.' For the first time there was emotion showing in Tovick's voice. 'And apparently the Curse said they were there to sell their water to Junktion so there was a merchants' tax that they levied in water, too. There were probably a couple of others. I wasn't there. I didn't hear it directly'

But I had been. I remembered the Steelheads shouting and hooraying back and forth as they began hauling the water drums off the Curse's carts. I remembered Safine's hand on her pistol and the woman whose name I didn't know whose arm Silk had had to hold to keep her from rushing them.

'Was there fighting?' Tovick shrugged.

'Maybe. You know how rumours are. Anyway, weren't you there?'

'I...' I was, I thought, but I'd walked away. I'm good at walking away. Tovick, I don't know what happened to them after they

brought me back. Did they fight with the Steelheads?'

He didn't answer. Instead he put the two-tone up on the same shelf as the laspistol, then took the pistol down and handed it to me.

'No tabs, Kass. Not any more. Full rate for the cleaning and I'll take a half-chip for the juicing if you want it juiced. Same for the two-tone. Ammo's gone up too. Te- Eight per clip. No haggling, and if you can find better anywhere in Junktion then good luck to you.' His voice was hard.

'Eight?' I shot back. 'And you were going to say ten, weren't you? For an autogun clip? What, are you tipping your damn bullets with pearl-spores?' My voice was coming up and Hetch took a step or two closer. 'And no tab, you might have spitting told me before I brought my damn weapons up here to put myself in hock. I think the Guild credits I had falling out of my arse must have landed somewhere I can't spitting find them.'

'Lamplighters get paid very well, everyone knows that,' Tovick replied calmly. 'But since you put it like that, you can take your pistol with you. I'll take that little stubber I see in your belt as a part-trade on the work, and I believe I'll take the two-tone as surety on the rest. I'm sure the town fathers will juice it for you. I'll see you again when you have your chips.'

It was all there in his look. I wanted to tell him all over again. I was a lamplighter. I kept the lights running so people could see. That was my job, nothing else. How was I supposed to be getting involved with all this? Didn't my work benefit everyone? Didn't anyone see that?

But there wasn't much I could tell him that I hadn't already



said. There were shadows under his eyes but the expression on his lined face didn't change.

I was following the clink of Hetch's bionic leg down the steps when the flophaired kid grabbed my shoulder just the way I'd grabbed the Firebrand's outside Nardo's rooms. I didn't turn, so he leaned forward and hissed in my ear. I could smell his rancid breath curling around my ear.

'You know 'bout Gartch and his water, I saw it in your face.' There was a satisfied gulp of air. 'Gonna tell everyone. Tell 'em you know something about, uh Gartch and, y'know, make sure that...'

I pulled away from his hand, but he kept his grip and sniggered. So I turned around, looked into the brown hair that hung in his face, carefully put my palm against his nose and shoved him back hard. I was down the crooked steps and away before he could collect himself to shout after me.

'Get him in here.' It was Gruett, the Steelhead boss I'd last seen in that shameful encounter at the gate. After the conversation with Tovick, seeing his scarred face again was like a slap. He was bright-eyed and vigorous, not like the thirsty and exhausted men and women we'd passed in the streets. I could guess where at least part of the Curse's water shipment had gone.

We'd come to the end of a long, looping trip through upper Junktion. I'd left the Gunnery seething inside and still without my guns working (and Tovick had taken the pistol), following

Hetch to meet another Firebrand I didn't recognise at the bunkerhouse. The two Cawdors had marched me straight off, down into the silt-ridden, gloomy ring-tunnel of Long-Gone Circle, its crowds of beggars and pedlars listless and frightened of the masked gangers that came tramping through the middle of them. Nobody called out to us for water. We left the tunnel almost under the Highborn Road before it curled around and met the buried lower levels of the Greimplatz drinking holes, and the Firebrands had led the way up one of the steep little burrows that connected the Circle with the main level of Junktion. It was so narrow that the two Firebrands had to go up in tandem, the younger one guiding Hetch's flamer pack so that it wouldn't jam in the little space. Something about that comforted me - these gangs couldn't be running the place yet if they had trouble with the little things.

For a few weird minutes I thought we were going back into Quackstown, but we passed by the top of Soiled Creek on a bridge high enough that the stink of the Creek was nearly bearable. We reached the foot of the Black Pile and I wondered if we were going all the way up to the Spyglass, but instead we stopped in front of a heavy power-gate where Gruett was waiting. He and the Cawdors didn't speak to one another. I stood in the middle wishing like hell I had a working cell for my laspistol.

'Get him in here,' was all. There was the whine of motors and the gate-slab squealed back just far enough for me to slip through. I left Gruett, Hetch and the nameless Cawdor behind.

I had never been into the garden compound before. Places

like this had their own techs, people personally loyal to the owner. The gardens had made an ex-slime farmer named Wilferra rich enough to be admitted to the town fathers, but not a lot of what he grew ever made it out to regular Junktioners like me. I stepped as far away from the gate as I dared without getting sucked into the commotion in die compound's yards, and looked around.

Everyone knew he grew knittermoss here to sell to the apothecaries and even some fancy Guilder medics uphive, and I could see shallow pits, home to beds of the stuff. The circular mesh-houses between the mould pits and the garden wall puzzled me until I saw a knotty tendril poking over the top of one of them. The thick wireweed beds around the sixward walls were supposed to have come from cuttings grown somewhere in town, and now I knew where. That was only the start - the whole compound was a maze of vats and beds and pits that Heliko could have hid in for a year if he'd tunnelled up in here, a bigger and more elaborate setup than anything I'd seen in the farm belt around Peelgut.

The whole place was milling with fighters. Metal-tattooed Goliath heads and oiled Cawdor masks caught the compound's overhead lights, and deeper in I saw those same orange lights glance off the smoked goggles of a little handful of House Delaque gangers as they sat on a bench bent over the autoguns they were loading. Here and there were individual hirelings wearing no gang's colours, bounty hunters and sump-gunnies lounging against walls or taking quiet nips from hip flasks. A pair of Ratskin trackers, a man and a woman, stretched out in a corner, lean and languid as snakes

at rest.

I had a bad feeling I knew what this was about.

'Master Kass. Master Sinden Kass. Yes, you! I looked around. Town father Wilferra had been a hard man when he had been a holesteader in the threeward rubble-dunes, but wealth had softened him. Over his beard he still had the fierce bony face of a badzone scrapper but the rest of his body seemed to have sagged away from that angular head, stretching out into a soft pear of fat that sat over his wire-weave belt. Beside him stood the Guilder Tai, his face still relaxed and amused. Was he like that with everyone, or did I entertain him somehow?

You've got a pretty singular idea about what "obeying instructions" means, Kass,' Wilferra barked at me. 'Weren't you meant to be here half a day ago?'

'It doesn't look like I've held you up at all, sir,' I responded calmly enough, 'and as I understand it I was to be at the bunkerhouse - where I went before I got sent here - armed and ready. Getting armed and ready as per instructions took some time.'

'You don't look armed to me,' grunted Wilferra. That's what, a single laspistol? Go on your rounds with that, do you?' I smiled, sort of. Lamplighters were such a common sight to most Junktioners that it was almost a surprise to talk to someone who didn't know us and our kit by sight.

'Not at the moment, sir, but my other weapon is... being worked on.'

'No good,' he snorted. 'Edzon, get Kass some proper kit and make sure he's fed and watered and ready. No weak links in this exercise.' Edzon, one of Wilferra's hetmen and an occasional cards companion, jerked his head for me to follow. I had almost drooled at the mention of food and managed to work up a trot as he led me deeper into the compound and through the crowds.

The fathers are throwing quite a bit of kit into this, Kass, so you'll have plenty to choose from. Master Wilferra and a few of the others, Stope and Zemmith and Horodni, are taking the attack on the reservoir pretty personally. And the Guild won't stand for it either, which is why you saw Tai back there.'

'Guilder Tai, in the cap?'

'Same. Lots of Hive City connections, I hear Spire connections too, but who knows?' We were coming up to an equipment shed that had turned into a makeshift armoury, and beside it... I stopped dead. Beside it I could see a griddle stretched over a burner-pit and smell the sizzle of fungus steak and meatcake. Before I could help it a fat drop of saliva rolled out of the corner of my mouth and made a break for my chin.

Edzon laughed. He had a moonface and a backcombed mane of yellow hair, and he liked to laugh. Except when he took me on over a card table.

'Okay, I give in. Feed yourself before you keel over and then we'll get you armed. I'd hate to think that kit's the best you could get with what you're always winning off me.' I looked at him. 'Oh, don't tell me you weren't told. No, Kass, this isn't a regulation lamplighter round, in case you hadn't guessed.

You're coming to Mirror-Bitten with us. We're going to bring in Garm Heliko.'

# 11: UNDER MIRROR-BITTEN

We were over eight kilometres out of Junktion on the Mirror-Bitten trail and I still hadn't stopped swearing under my breath.

This was meant to be over. I had the scabs and scratches from the rats and I had the bruises and welts from the scavies. I'd come home alive. Hell, I'd have come home a legend if I could find anyone who'd let me actually sit down and tell them the bloody legend. The sort of stories that even a full ganger will still be telling the juves ten years on. This was the time to be regaling a drinking hole with stupid exaggerations, not joining some insane town father's army of vengeance.

They had given me an autogun from the guardhouse stash at Wilferra's farm. It was heavy and the balance was bad. I swore quietly at that, too.

'Your part in this,' Wilferra had told me via Edzon, 'is very simple. The 'steads around Mirror-Bitten are tough. You're going to tenderise them. This level narrows vertically between Chamberpit and Dripdown. The tunnels under it are full of mud and tox, but the high vents are clear. You should have no trouble getting through and finding their power tap.' Edzon had grinned at me over the chunk of meatcake I was wolfing. 'Bet you were wondering why they wanted a lamplighter along.' I'd diverted enough energy from chewing to shrug my shoulders. The Ratskins reckon they know the place better than Spiders-Fear-Him, who's from a different tribe and doesn't know all the

hive-songs for these parts. You'll be somewhere around the holestead borders but you won't join in the fighting. There's a decent-sized mob of us going to stay behind the line-'

Chewing, I jerked my head in Wilferra's general direction.

'-right, Wilferra, Guilder Tai and a couple of fathers who want to be there when Heliko goes down. Nobody wants our last lamplighter shot, Kass. As soon as their lights are down, the gangers and bounty-boys go in and you come out. Your next three water rations get doubled when you come back. Don't worry, they know they're going in under dark. They'll be fine.'

I hadn't thought about the gangers and didn't really care. But something else hit me as I swallowed my last mouthful of meatcake and thought about it for a moment.

'Doubled water ration? That's a lot to spend if everyone's getting the same payment. Where's it coming from? I thought-' I caught myself in time to remember I wasn't supposed to know about Gartch. 'Is Gartch's caravan coming back soon?'

'Search me.' Edzon was obviously in the know -when he dodged my question he did exactly the same twitch of the lips as when he'd got a good hand. 'It's been promised everyone who comes back from the raid, providing we get Heliko. I do know they topped up nicely with what we got out of those Escher by the gate before we sent them home.' Edzon had gone out to watch that, he said. I had been ravenous, but listening to his snorting little laughs as he described Safine and her caravan being jeered empty-handed up the trail took the rest of my appetite away.



I'd always liked Edzon, but since that moment and all through the march I'd found myself wanting to grip his saggy cheeks hard between my fingers and flatten his nose with my forehead. I breathed deeply instead - vents on the Mirror-Bitten trail mean the air is usually sweet and not very dusty - and held out my hand to the two men he had brought over.

Hoisha Oordell introduced himself first. His hand was as soft as his voice and his eyes were invisible behind his dust-goggles, which were dark even though the trail was half-lit like they all are. House Delaque, of course, narrow-shouldered and bald-headed, in a straight black thermal coat-cloak that could fox heat-scopes if you knew the trick of it. A startling, puckered scar ran from his brow right over the crown of his head and disappeared behind his ear. From the look of it a blade-stroke had lifted a great flap of flesh right off his skull that hadn't properly healed back down.

Second was Runs-Touching-Shadows, a ratskin tracker and the opposite of the Delaque in every way. He was almost undressed but for hide trousers and the giant rat-pelt around his shoulders, from the animal he would have hunted and killed for his manhood ceremony. His skin was brown and unmarked and his hair black and he didn't shake my hand.

Edzon stood there expectantly. He obviously thought we'd all get along. Maybe this was where my lamplighter lone-traveller man-of-action mystique worked against me. I wasn't quite sure where to start.

'Me ahead to scout, you two behind,' Oordell started for me. The 'skin to direct and you to tell us where you need to stop

and what you need to do.' He sighed his H-sounds, and there was that tiny trace of a lisp that some Delaque accents pick up. Runs-Touching-Shadows gave a curt nod.

'Only need to guide,' he said. He had a good, musical voice. 'Not much here to hurt your ngalot hides.' He flashed a grin at us that Edzon returned, probably because he didn't know that ngalot was local Ratskin for 'burdensome child' or 'simpleton'. Or a clumsy Underhiver who didn't know the ways of the badzones. 'We'll turn ahead there. Where the girder rides up through the metal is a shaft to climb. Wrap yourselves.' He held up his hands and showed the wrappings he would use to protect them. I looked at them and down at my own hands and the place on my belt where my pouch usually was. Balls. The dangers of having to run from home in too much of a hurry. I suddenly realised with a sink of my stomach how naked I felt. No hat, no frock-coat, no tool pack in its place over my shoulder, no lantern-pole.

No Nardo, no Venz, no Mudeye, no...

'Little under-equipped, Kass? Don't worry, we knew you'd need tools and I wasn't sure how many of your own you still had.' Edzon handed me a satchel-pack of dirty yellow plastic weave. There was a slim little stub pistol in a loop on the side and I could see the grips of tools poking out from their sheaths under the flap. Smaller, lighter than mine, for smaller, lighter hands.

'That's from the other dead one. You know, the woman, the stabbed one. She went last lightson in the Cyclops Square doc's rooms, they say'

Thamm. I hadn't even gone to sit by her bedside.

Edzon didn't see or didn't get it or didn't care. Thoughts of my forehead and his nose again. Oordell had already disappeared toward the girder in a whisper of coat. It was the Ratskin who saw it, and although he hadn't shaken my hand, now he gripped my upper arm for a moment.

'Mourn your companion for a few breaths if you need to,' he said, and left me there to mutter 'sorry' to the sad little pack before I slung it by my side and followed him.

There were climbing gloves in Thamm's toolkit but they were so small I didn't even try to put them on. The whole expedition stopped to wait while the three of us went on ahead and so the whole alley-trail was full of silent, armed shapes watching me try to find some hand-wrappings by touch. I heard one mutter of 'lost your nerve, lamplighter?' in the middle distance and a small current of chuckling.

That came just as I got my hands on a pair of insulator pads and pride made me grab those out and use them to scale the girder. Once I was through into the ceiling crawlway I stopped again in the glow from Oordell's little bluelight to fasten them around my hands as well as I could. I wondered if the other two were wondering what sort of man they'd been stuck with. Anyone who travels in the Underhive keeps gloves or wrappings for places like, well, like the ladders and girders around Mirror-Bitten, where effluent drips have left hard, sharp, toxic crusts on things you might want to climb on. At

least I'd put on my kneepads before I'd left my rooms.

Unreality swam over me again as I lit the bluelight away from the hole. How long was it since I'd woken up to the banging on my door? How long before that that I'd been lying under the puffballs looking right into the scaly's face? How long since I'd been standing next to Enning, reading WATER FOR ALL, NOT JUST THE RICH off a roadpipe wall?

It felt like five minutes and it felt like forever. I already had trouble remembering what Junktion had been like when a water flask was something you filled without thinking and you didn't see gun-muzzles in every shadow you walked past. When Nardo had been someone to drink with and chat aimlessly to about the price of ammo or the women we saw in the Greimplatz, not an awful, guilty responsibility waiting for me back in my rooms. When Thamm and Venz and Mudeye had been alive. When I could think about the town I lived in without that part of me whispering walk away from it all. You know it's best.

I needed something to distract myself, and I found it by straightening up too far. My head hit the rough ceiling and the borrowed autogun's stock scraped loudly along the rockcrete. Ahead of me the bluelight winked out and the other two waited in silence while my heart and my breathing slowed down and I lowered myself into the full crouch I should have been in from the first. None of us said anything, but I heard a slightly heavier breath from ahead of me that I thought came from Runs-Touching-Shadows. It could have been amusement or exasperation or contempt. Then the little glow reappeared

down in front and we started moving again.

This space hadn't been built as a crawlway, just an empty layer between two levels, for access or to separate two zones or just one of those meaningless, forgotten little pockets you find all over the Underhive. It was no longer the wide space it must have been built as; roof-falls and collapses had made a maze of it. We followed paths and patches of bare rockcrete and picked our way over scatters of rubble that rocked and ground under our feet, zigzagging and turning in directions that seemed arbitrary to me but that Runs-Touching-Shadows made with quiet confidence. The air smelled of rockcrete dust and the rubble and floors we passed were as bald as Oordell's scar-ripped head. No lichen. I wondered why that-

No. Keep concentrating. A second later we stopped abruptly and Oordell crouched down and motioned us back. Heart in my mouth, I backed up and watched him.

I saw now why Oordell had been in the lead and not the ratskin. The jiggle-plate under the rubble we'd been about to cross was apparent when he put the blue-light right next to it and pointed, but I never would have spotted it on my own. The impressed breath from Runs-Touching-Shadows meant I wasn't the only one.

Oordell half-turned to us and crouched with his arms and legs oddly spread; after a moment I realised that the pose fanned his coat out so the bluelight wouldn't be visible to anyone beyond us. He pointed at me and made a couple more hand gestures until I saw what he wanted and untied one of the insulator pads from my hand. Then I held the bluelight for

Oordell as he hunched over and Runs-Touching-Shadows straightened up - nearly all the way, he wasn't tall - to scan around us with a heatseer monocle.

Oordell's hands moved as quickly and surely as mine, clearing the plate so he could get at it and then neatly trapping the wobbling trigger so it couldn't tip and close the circuit. A tilt of his head showed me where he'd spotted the shrapmines wedged into cavities in the rubble. I shuddered, he grinned at me. Then he pulled a right black hood up out of the collar of his coat and over his head, took his light back and we moved on again.

That was only the first one. We had another shrapmine buried in the dust, then a tripwire that would have yanked a pair of scawy-style tox-bombs onto our heads. Three times we found spines of tox crystal, harvested from the edges of chemical pools and filed boot-piercingly sharp, hidden in dust-drifts. Oordell dealt with the traps, and Runs-Touching-Shadows' instincts steered us around the places where the rubble was so thick that a trap could be too well-hidden, or that was so unstable that we couldn't cross it silently.

After what felt like hours, Runs-Touching-Shadows led us to the lip of a cavity in the floor. We hadn't been over the alley-road for some time: now we were over the giant pits and forests of support pilings that held up this part of the Underhive. I gulped as I looked over the edge. I could see floors and catwalks underneath us but there were places

where the drop just went down and down. I wondered if it were possible to fall from here and end up splashing down in the Sump. Then I swatted the thought from my mind like a man fending off a poisonous insect.

The chasm we were standing over, and the rockcrete-and-girder crag in the middle of it, was called Mirror-Bitten. The crusts of chem-crystals that grow in so much of the Underhive had almost covered the crag here. Brightly reflective and razor-edged, they could deliver a wound as deep and infectious as the teeth of the great flocks of carrion-bats that infested the chasm further down. The settlers who'd founded the holesteads here had found that out early, and the name had stuck.

Covering the top of the crag was not a single town but a patchwork of them, although how anyone could live in all that nerve-numbing empty air I couldn't guess. They were mostly just fortified, glorified holesteads like Dripdown, Hanson's Hole and Shyaway, clusters of little habs and shacks clinging to the crumbling rockcrete or spreading along giant horizontal struts or chopped into the rockcrete of the pilings themselves. One- or two-family affairs, harvesting the moulds and parasitic creepers off the superstructure that went into their famous liquor-stills. I could make out dust awnings, firepits and algae vats, fungus gardens, fermenting stills, the holesteads themselves.

That dark 'stead by the low corner of the piling was Hanson's Hole. I could only make it out at all from the vestigial rot-glow from under the thicket of man-sized waxswat

mushrooms next to it. Dripdown was on the far side of a highstump of pillar, hard white lamps on every building shining defiantly into the darkness. Shyaway was an insane knot of struts and supports bridging a pair of wide walkways, always being stripped and rebuilt, the lichen they farmed furring the bulkheads inside the collars of fencing and gates that each strut wore to mark their boundary.

These were tough places. No way were all the traps we'd passed put up just to protect Heliko. Any number of gangs and gunnies would be prepared to fight for Mirror-Bitten liquor instead of paying for it. Dripdown and Mash Pit had both changed hands violently in the time since I'd come to Junktion, and there had been at least one failed coup at Hanson's Hole. Word was the families all kicked in to trap and guard the place, working it so that no one family had a clear route in so no one family could betray the others.

The last trap was a deadfall that would have dropped an acid-bomb out of a papered-over nook in the ceiling had we kicked the hidden magnet switch. We had only spotted it because the bluelight had chanced to cast a shadow Runs-Touching-Shadows thought shouldn't be there, and it had taken Oordell and myself ten minutes to disarm. By the end of it we were both sweating and shaking from having to hold the trap parts in precise positions while Oordell jammed and gummed them in place. I was nervous. Some time, it stood to reason, we were going to come to something he didn't spot or couldn't take apart. I couldn't help thinking that not too many people who ever tried this on the Mirror-Bitten booze-farms ever came back. Certainly at least some of them had been as



good as Oordell was.

But most people who tried this on the booze-farms were after the farms themselves, and we weren't. After the acid-mine we started to find more and more pits in the floor like that first one, giving us a view of the girders that crisscrossed the giant cavity Mirror-Bitten stood in. Then we began seeing holes filled with trip-webs, or lined with wireweed that was too regular to be natural, or points of red light on the ceiling that meant there was a trip-beam hooked up to screamer alarms or an automatic gunnery rig down below. It was only going to get deadlier from here.

So we backtracked, carefully surveying the untrapped holes. Breaking into Mirror-Bitten and storming the little holestead of Walking Man was for Wilferra's gang-and-gunny circus. I didn't need to walk in their gates. I didn't even need to get right across this garden of deathtraps. I only needed to get to their juice supply. When Runs-Touching-Shadows spotted a pair of pale stones in the bluelight that turned out to mark a jutting stub of metal, we knew we were almost there.

Runs-Touching-Shadows slid through the hole first, wrapped hands now also coated in patches of carefully looped spider-cord to help his grip. He lay on the gritty rockcrete and oozed over the lip of the hole like a snake, heat-goggles bulging from his head.

I lay next to Oordell at the edge, and reminded myself to breathe as he hung by his hands over the drop. If he hung

there long he might be seen or his grip would tire, if he moved fast he'd be seen for sure. Lean muscles bunched in his arms and shoulders as he moved carefully from handhold to handhold to the chutes.

Ice-In-Her-Hand, the other ratskin, had described them to me on the walk. She had hunted face-eaters and macroscorpis through them, and told us they'd take the weight of three men. She wasn't willing to hazard more than three, and apparently Wilferra had ranted obscenities at her for that: he had fancied the chutes as an invasion route.

They didn't look like much. I remembered the metal that had buckled under me in the rathole and thought about the drop that I'd be crawling over here. Then I went to work on swallowing my heart back down to where it ought to be and watching Oordell pay out to Runs-Touching-Shadows's belt.

Then he was there. The ratskin jackknifed up and got a leg on firm footing, then the other, then carefully released his hands from the pits in his ceiling, our floor. I could see him smiling to himself and shrugging the strain out of his shoulders and arms.

I could do this. I blew out a breath, then at Oordell's nod I reached out for the line and slid out of the hole as Runs-Touching-Shadows had done. The cord bit painfully into my wrapped hands as I hooked my legs over it. No problem. I'd done this before. Never over a space like this but screw that, spit it, never mind it, I'd done this before and I just needed to keep my hands and feet moving on the cord, Oordell had it and knew what he was doing. I looked down along the line and

saw Runs-Touching-Shadows wedged into position, keeping the line fast at his end, and I moved a little bit faster. Part of my brain was still howling over the drop underneath me, but I drowned it out and breathed and finally, beautifully, I was off the cord and sitting on metal again.

The chutes hung from the rockcrete ceiling from thick metal pylons, twisting and joining and splitting like water-worms, turning right-angles to plunge down the sides of stanchions or swooping away into the dark. It was the stubs of their mountings, emerging from the rockcrete above us, that Runs-Touching-Shadows and Ice-In-Her-Hand had marked for her hunting expeditions. Rats alone knew what they'd used to carry.

Two roads came out to connect Mirror-Bitten to the rest of the Underhive. I knew there was a narrow, dew-slippery path down the far side of it, down to a causeway across an effluent river before you started up the bat-infested trail to Fume Pass. The other was the bridge that shot out across the chasm to disappear into a hacked-out hole in the rockcrete and join the trail to Junktion - where the town fathers' army was waiting. Triangulating from the bridge and the biggest 'steads, I picked out the strings of yellow lights and the cooking-fire glow that marked out Walking Man. Not much to look at. A hole dug into the slope of the piling, a shelf of floor and overhanging shelter jutting out from it. A row of stills under the lights and the gleam of metal from the dusty patch of ground in front of the house: the cellar where they were soon going to wish they'd never hidden Garm Heliko.

I was surprised by the sudden surge of relish I felt as we slithered along the top of the chute. I hadn't exactly felt like shedding a tear for Heliko's gang after their raid on the cistern had gone wrong, but mostly my reaction to Yonni's account had been basic shock at someone trying a guns-blazing assault in the middle of a settlement - the kind of thing that'll get a price on your head from city to sump. But I found it hard to resent him for trying.

Runs-Touching-Shadows took the lead now, alternating between his heatseers and a little wormglow scope, that picked up the light it saw and brightened it for the eye looking into it. He was scanning for sentries, movement in the 'steads. The more often he scanned, the more confident his movements got and we made good time.

The only reason I could have for that sudden hate for Heliko was that he was concrete. He was a face I could put on everything that had gone wrong in my home town since the raid had come down. He wasn't a town father that I owed a job and water ration to, and he wasn't some yapping scavy or a faceless water-mUgger in a Junktion alley. He was totally hateable, real and human and all the fear and anger was starting to earth itself through him.

As Runs-Touching-Shadows led us around the curve of a stanchion to where the chutes dipped and tilted into Minor-Bitten, I realised with a queasy certainty that was surely how the rest of Junktion felt about the lamplighters. At once the relish was gone.

'Lamplighter spies get what they deserve', I thought to

myself and began to belly-slide down the top of the chute.

Nothing is easy. I wanted a nice easy slide and so, of course, the metal here was so rust-roughened we had to walk our way down on hands and feet. The flat part hadn't been this bad. Maybe the holesteaders had poured something out to make it harder to move on. I'd noticed they'd shot to ribbons all the chutes that went over Mirror-Bitten itself.

We were well below the level of the holesteads when Runs-Touching-Shadows stopped us and rose up into a half-crouch. We waited for a moment while he measured up the distance, then there was a pneumatic thud and a clink and he stepped calmly off the edge of the chute and swung into the girderwork on the grapnel line he'd fired. We waited in the dark. Oordell had his thermal cloak spread over him, but if someone looked over the edge of Mirror-Bitten with a heatseer I'd shine like a torch.

Two clicks of a tiny red message-light. We stood up. Runs-Touching-Shadows had carried one end of Oordell's clip-line across with him and now it snapped taut as he anchored it. Another few moments of hanging from a line, but now the dimness somehow made it easier to cross.

'Hope you got everything picked out, Kass.' I jumped as Oordell's voice came out of the gloom from somewhere behind his bluelight. It seemed like a year since any of us had spoken a word. But I knew what to do now.

Most holesteaders don't have the knowhow to rig up a complicated tapping array. It's easier to just put what you want to see closer to your cable. That means that if you get the

chance to look down on a settlement like I just had you can pick out the main juice lines pretty easily. I knew just where Walking Man got its juice and just what to do about it.

And I was right, too. I love it when I'm right. I just took it like a job like any other, like I was swapping an insulator on the Guilders' Hill path-light, like I was tinkering with a bulb filament in Yonni's workshop, like I was...

Hah, like I was climbing up under a holestead where a bunch of thirst-crazy fugitives were hanging out, getting ready to cut their juice so a small army of nutso gang-thugs my town had hired could shoot them in the dark.

Fine by me. I had (a dead woman's) tools in my hands again and I was spitting delighted to be using them. I was damn near humming as I walked up and down the struts, using Oordell's glimmering bluelight to track the juice cables. The cable attached itself to the underside of an old crosswalk a couple of step-flights above me and where cables did that they tended to...

I was right again. It snaked up from under the crosswalk, up a sheaf of other old cables that ran along the railing - I hopped over a spot where the mesh of the walk had disintegrated from corrosion - and there it entered a sheaf of other cables and then, ah, yes. Here were the newer lines trailing down from the nearest 'steads, with their rougher bundling and hand-wrapped insulator jackets, and here was where they disappeared into the main cable-tap. The join was wrapped

and secured as tight as they could make it, of course, and painted with a paste of 'shroom-sap and pulverised glass to make it hard to pull free. But there are plenty of times in a lamplighter's rounds where we need to kill the juice running through a cable, and there are all kinds of elegant ways. What did I look like, some cud-chewing Goliath heavy?

Running down one side of Thamm's satchel was a belt of conductor nails with insulated tips. I pulled one of them out by the bluelight - no point in risking the glare of a filament lamp until I was in the clear - and a striker. I've got craftsman's hands and long thin fingers, but Thamm's kit still felt impossibly delicate when I held it.

The conductor went through the jacket with satisfying ease with each tap of the striker. There were other, dead cables strung in the same bundle, and all I had to do was-

I flashed the bluelight in the direction I'd left the other two. The light was designed not to carry far, but it went far enough for them to see it. I heard a grunt in the darkness. They had understood the warning.

-knock it through the cable and into one of the others and it would be in the bag. I lifted the striker.

Tik tik tik.

That wasn't me. What the hell? I frowned and drew the striker back for another tap. Tik tik.

My first thought was rats, and my hand was halfway to my pistol. But no, not rat claws or milliasaur feet, and I'd never met a lashworm that could live in metal and face-eaters didn't

make that noise. It was a mechanical sound. I looked around.

It was Oordell. I could see him clearly now, because he and Runs-Touching-Shadows were outlined by the signal lamp that Oordell had unslung from his belt. They were shining it back the way we had come, up at the bridge.

But what were the others doing even within sight? Weren't they...

From above there were yells and gun-flashes and a klaxon that bawled for five ear-wringing seconds before it cut off.

Panicking, I gave the conductor nail another hit and that did it. There was a whumph of displaced power as the conductor punched out of the other side of the cable and fused to the smaller cords beyond it. The glow from the holestead above us cut out as if chopped out of the air with an axe. I smelled the stink of melting insulator around me, and from somewhere below us came weird purple flashes and spits and cracks of white sparks as relays and breakers deeper in the system blew.

There, they had their darkness. All clear, wait in the second line out of the action, my arse. Edzon and I were going to have words.

I started to retrace my steps back through the rats'-cradle of superstructure to where the others were waiting. At first I barely noticed the change in the air and I wondered why Runs-Touching-Shadows was sprinting towards me so fast his feet seemed to skim above the bars, shouting. From behind him Oordell's voice in a frantic hiss.



'Hold on! Ware 'bove and below! Hold!'

There was a series of metal clanks from above us, and a sudden and human scream. It was a warrior, whose name I never learned but who had the bare torso and crested hair of a Steelhead and ring after ring of ammo bandoliers around his body. He'd been hit, hand flamer or hotshot. Fire billowed around his shoulders and chest but it hadn't gone deep enough to stop him screaming over and over again as he came down. He bounced, crashed and fell, and although the screams stopped when his head smacked against a crossbar his burning body kept pinwheeling down out of sight. Somewhere below us came a string of explosions, overlapping one another as they surged up past us, the sound and flash of his ammo and grenades cooking off.

Runs-Touching-Shadows was shouting again. He punched my chest and pointed his hand down and even though his speech was breaking in and out of Ratskin I got it. That change was audible now, the screeching and rustling. We raced for a wider crosswalk and flung ourselves flat, and in the dark I heard a whisper that must have been Oordell desperately wrapping his coat tight around him for whatever protection it would give.

From far underneath us, fired up by the power short and driven wild by the explosions, the carrion-bats came surging.



# 12: A TALK WITH GUILDER TAI

There was the time a swarm of them swooped us in a caravan run at Skinned Knee, and a nest of them that got stirred up in a slag pit at Abednego. Those were bad enough. Carrion-bats are plenty bad when you can see them. Now all I could do was lie flat, listening to the biggest bat-swarm I ever heard, a Hive-ending army of swarms, come raging up at me in the dark.

They say the bats sing to the Hive ghosts in voices only the dead can hear, and those songs give them ghost-sight as they fly through the dark. They must have been crying to the ghosts for help then, because the air thrummed with the suggestion of a sound I could barely hear and which made the hair on my arms stand on end. Then there was the squealing as their ghost songs leaked down into sounds my ears could hear. I felt my face contort as the noise worked its way into my ears like a rusty wire. I wanted to get my hands loose from the mesh and clap them to my face, jam my fingers into my ears before those scraping voices somehow started digging into the meat of my brain.

Runs-Touching-Shadows was singing a ratskin counter-song, something with deep liquid-sounding words I didn't understand. There was another layer of sound under the screeching, too, the world-filling rush of thousands of wings.

The bats brought a breeze up with them filled with a filthy, rot-musk-sweet stink. Carrion-bats trail bad dust and parasites like a mist and I didn't doubt the air was as full of that as it was of their bodies and noise. I didn't dare move, though; lift myself to give them a target. If it gets the angle right a carrion-bat can sweep by you and take off a joint of your finger without slowing down, leaving an infected cut that will never properly heal even if it doesn't kill you.

Oordell shrieked. I'll never forget the sound. We couldn't see what had happened to him in the blackness, but I think a bat got in under that coat he was trying to cocoon himself in, got trapped inside with him and started biting. That shriek was not a man frightened that he might die. It was a man realising he's already dead. From fear or blind instinct, he started running. We heard his footsteps and Runs-Touching-Shadows shouted something. Oordell didn't listen; maybe he was beyond listening. There were shots - I counted four wild muzzle flashes, in all directions, all painting Oordell against a curtain of matted grey fur and the glint of eyes and teeth. In the last flash he was on his knees, and then we heard him bounce off a spar below us in the dark. We never saw him again.

The shrilling changed note and suddenly Runs-Touching-Shadows was powering straight over me in a flat hunters' crawl, hissing 'follow!' in my ear. I went after him, so close he nearly kicked my head each time he moved his feet. There was no way to know where we were bound, but I couldn't lie underneath these monsters another minute. I had to move.

The Ratskin must have known what the change in their

voices meant, because after a moment he shouted back to me.

'Follow me! Wait to see then follow! Gets worse here!'

I thought I could feel the skin around my ears writhing.

Those screams. I gnawed on the inside of my mouth, trying to focus my mind away from the noise, and then Runs-Touching-Shadows was on his feet faster than I could believe and racing for a vertical girder. He'd seen what I hadn't: there were rough handholds crudely sawn into the I-beam edges up to a branch of the chute system, a round vent-pipe with, thank the ghosts, a grating hanging open..

When in danger like this, find a Ratskin and imitate him.

They know. I launched myself after him, the bluelight making crazy strobe-frozen pictures: the bats, ripping jaws jutting from under their gnarled flat faces, wings outstretched. One was right in front of my face for an instant and then whispered past my ear, crying and shrilling, before I was able to cry out. In the next swing of the bluelight a smaller bat was hitting into the crook of my left elbow. Its fangs caught in the loose cloth of my shirt, and I raced up the ladder-girder with the fluttering, teeth-gnashing bundle at my arm.

Two more collided with my legs as Runs-Touching-Shadows pulled me up through the vent-grate. Snarling, he grabbed the bat out of the crook of my arm, ripping free the wedge of cloth still around its teeth, wrung it skilfully to death and pitched the carcass back out through the vent.

We both lay there, getting our breath and listening to the storm of animals beat against the air outside our chute. I

checked my arm underneath the sleeve that the bat had torn, by the bluelight and the cheap filament lamp that the Ratskin lit, but the skin of my arm was whole. Runs-Touching-Shadows nodded and shuffled down the chute, crouched almost to all fours under the tight metal roof. He reached a corner, moved deftly into the tight angle and grinned for me to follow him again. Then the side of his skull exploded as his head wrenched sideways and by the time the boom of the shot died away Runs-Touching-Shadows was already flat against the side of the duct, slumped down from a crouch to a sprawl with the grin still on his dead face.

Panic made me stupid. My hand clanged against the vent wall as I flailed over my shoulder trying to get at the autogun cinched to my back. The gun came just loose enough for the muzzle to wedge against the roof and shove me off-balance. I went from my hunched half-crawl down on one kneecap, to a quick spear of pain.

That cleared my head for a moment and made me think. Getting the autogun wasn't an option. I'd still be trying to wrestle it around to point the right way when whoever was down there gave me what he'd given the Ratskin.

I drew my las, and wrestling the long barrel loose in a tight chute was almost as bad. (Ever wonder why those little snubnose pistols are called 'tunnel-stubbers'? Or why gangers wear them in a little upside-down clutch-holster on their shoulders? I didn't after this.) After a moment I remembered some of Venz's old tunnel-fighting tips, dropped down on my belly, drew the pistol and passed it from hand to hand, turning

it over when I had it in front of me, thumbing the arming-catch just as Garm Heliko came around the corner.

He didn't look much at first. Not the human devil I'd been building up on top of the man I dimly remembered. Just a stocky Underhive drifter with unruly black hair, cursing as he tried to force his way past the ratskin's tangled body. If Runs-Touching-Shadows had been any less lean Heliko would have been stranded there, but as it was he had his head and shoulders around the bend before he looked up and saw me. By then I was spread out full length and carefully sighting along my las, using the bluelight to aim for his left eye. Then he fired his tunnel-stubber.

I'd taken my time because I'd thought he couldn't possibly work his hand around to the angle to shoot at me, and of course he didn't. He just fired down and let the bullet skim and bounce down the chute. He didn't need to try to bounce it into me - just the very presence of the ricochets made me forget my shot and duck. I felt the bullet a hair's breadth away from my forehead as it whined by, spanked off the metal and stung my calf then ricocheted away down the vent. I yelped at the pain and the reflex jerk snapped yellow lasbolts into the top of the pipe and scarred the metal red-hot.

Heliko was all the way around the corner, the eyes on either side of his sharp nose as hard as chisels. He was blood-blotched, not all of it Runs-Touching-Shadows'. His gunbelts and bandoliers were all on and loaded, and he grabbed for one of them now.

'Tox bomb, lamplighter!' he shouted at me. His voice filled

the vent walls like the gunshots he'd fired. 'Breakable as a bastard! Don't think I won't crunch it, got nothing to lose!'

He probably didn't even have it, I decided later. Who'd fling himself into a narrow pipe with something like that in a bandolier pouch where it could shatter against the walls with any movement? But the memory of the tox-bombs landing among the Curse convoy was still vivid and so the threat did what he needed it to: I went sprawling back along the chute, slithering down it while Heliko shoved past the ratskin's body and came after me. I still had the bluelight gripped in my left hand and it flickered back and forth as I moved, making Heliko a shadowy growling shape in the dark.

I snapped off a shot toward the sounds and the shape. After-image danced in my vision and Heliko roared. I'd aimed down the middle of the chute - I had to have hit something. But then another shot skated down the vent roof just above my head and in ducking away from it I half-pitched back through the open grating and hung by one hand, the bluelight dropping past me to clank on the metal below. Instantly I could feel the soft impacts as swarming carrion-bats crashed into my dangling, kicking legs.

I tried to drag myself into the vent again but suddenly there was a hand, strong and warm and hard with calluses, planted over my face with a finger in each of my eyes, shoving me back. I growled in protest and tried to hang on but then something metal and foul-tasting started trying to work its way into my mouth: the barrel of Heliko's tunnel-stubber. I twisted my head, cried out and let go.



I dropped through near-total darkness full of screeches and wing beats. The blackness made it seem like longer, like floating, and then I crashed onto my back and shoulders, the autogun underneath me. The hit smashed the wind out of my lungs and the wits out of my head.

The shrieking of the bats might have lessened a little, or I might have blacked out for a moment. After that moment I was lying there conscious again, trying to heave breath into my lungs by main force, willing my body to hoist itself up. I heard Heliko coming down the handholds I had climbed up minutes ago and then he hopped off the lowest one and landed with one foot full on my chest, slamming me back down.

It was the second physical shock to my system, or it was the sound of him laughing as he ducked under the swarming bats and crab-walked away, but suddenly my breath and movement were back and I was sitting up. My hand had stayed locked on the grip of the laspistol through the fall, and now I shouted with anger and squeezed the trigger.

Bats bayed as a fan of lasbolts burned the air over Heliko's head, lighting up his bent back and the outlines of the mangy bats that were circling him. My third shot punched one out of the air a hands-breadth over his shoulder and my fourth skewered two in front of him.

Heliko fired three wild shots over his shoulder to spoil my aim before I could readjust it. He must have used the muzzle-flash to check his footing, because in the blink of light from the lasbolt I answered with I saw him leaping into space.

He didn't fall. He didn't die the way Oordell had. I saw gun-

flashes again, and heard him shouting, not screaming, shouting oaths and obscenities at the bats around him. His voice and those gunshots moved, dropped and receded as though he were running, then jumping, then falling, but I never heard a death-cry. Just the ever-fading echo of his roaring voice gradually sinking away into the blackness and the rushing of wings.

It was Ice-In-Her-Hand who came climbing down through the girderwork to find me.

By the time I eventually climbed up into Mirror-Bitten, the holestead of Walking Man was almost gone. I walked through a mosaic of torch beams thrown by the laughing, hooting gangers, lighting up the smoke from the burning holestead and lichen beds. Every second Firebrand I passed seemed to have a hand flamer or a bandolier of scarlet hotshot shells, and the Steelheads were toting giant hammers that even their heavy bodies strained to swing, or long-barrelled autocannons, or thermal mines. Weapons to wreck buildings with.

'Here he is! Man who put out the lights!' It was Gruett of the Steelheads, brandishing a melta-gun over his head as though it were a sidearm. 'Get over here, little lamplighter! Seems you're some use in a fight after all!' The Steelheads around him sniggered rather than laughed. I started to notice things they were carrying: machine parts in slings and satchels, strips of fungus, trinkets that didn't look like anything a Goliath

ganger would carry.

'Want to see it? He got away, I hear. Got away down the pipes. We cleaned the nest out, though, got them all except him. Vermin, little man, all of them vermin.' He dug his fingers painfully into my shoulder and steered me to the edge of a little shack-cellar. Take a look.'

There wasn't much to see. This was where the farmers of Walking Man had let Heliko and his allies lie low. He had had more hangers-on than he had used in the raid, either that or he had attracted more since. There were at least a dozen corpses in there, burning with grudging yellow flames. Through the smoke I saw Hetch of the Firebrands standing on the other side of the hatch, flamer at the ready to freshen up the blaze. He looked at me, impassive under his heavy mask. The stink of burning meat didn't seem to bother him.

'Little false wall down there. Whole other room and a flue down to the tunnel levels and all sorts of little surprises. Would've thought our little pet Ratty-skins would have sniffed 'em out or something. They like rubbing those little noses of theirs in the dirt, don't they?' That did get the other Goliaths guffawing.

These little scummers were all over the place. You should've seen them, lamplighter, soon 's the lights went out and they didn't have the stabbers to spot us coming over the bridge they went aaaww! Aaawww!' Gruett flapped his hands in a parody of effeminate panic, and his gangers laughed again.

'Shoulda seen the flapheads go in, too. Turn out to have a

bit of guts to 'em, who'd have thought?' I looked over at Hetch. If he registered the slur he didn't react to it. 'They're something to see with their blood up. Better be careful of them, Kass.' Meaty fingers fell on my shoulder and dug in again. 'But he's got a way of worming out, hasn't he? Heliko. Got a way of slithering out of trouble like a little worm. Good job a worm like that never crossed paths with a good solid Goliath man. We'd have seen to him.'

Gruett's other hand chopped hard into my kidneys and I gasped, falling to my knees, the side of my body lighting up. The Steelhead trod hard on my ankle, twisting it painfully and pinning my foot to the ground.

'Except I hear tell he got past you and away, you litde toad, so I think it's about time for you to start watching yourself. I don't like your skinny little techy hands any more than I like your little rat-face.' An open-handed clout. I could reach for a belt-knife, but I had seen the meshmail covering Gruett's gut and thighs, and the dozen armed Steelheads behind us. 'Seems to me my men are going to give you a little reminder each time they see you around Junktion from now on. Nobody likes you in Junktion. Not even the Heliko worm, the way I hear it.'

The final hit was to my temple and left me lying next to the corpse pit with my head ringing. I waited a few shallow, nauseous breaths and then stood up. I wished

I hadn't noticed that several of the corpses in the burning pit were very obviously not gangers. However many families had run this stead before now, they didn't any more. They didn't

exist any more. I suppose I shouldn't have expected the Junktion gangs to do anything else.

It had taken hours for the makeshift Junktion army to get on the road and start for home. These people didn't feel they'd come to do a job of work, the way that most of the town watchmen did. When it came to battle they were still gangers, and so after the battle they did what gangers did: they celebrated.

It had started with the Walking Man liquor stash of Second Best and Halftooth. The Steelheads had already started on it by the time Gruett and I had our conversation by the fire pit, and as the flames died down their spirits fired up more and more. Up by the boundary fence, Volk's Firebrands were being led in some kind of service by Volk himself. I couldn't hear the details, but there seemed to be a lot of shouting and raised fists and shooting of flamers and pistols into the air.

It wasn't too hard to see what was coming, and by the time the first punch-up started - two Steelheads with ferocious facial piercings and chain-bracelets punishing one another with great haymaker swings and no thought to finesse - I was slipping away to join the second tier of the expedition. The tier I was supposed to have been in for the whole fight. I was almost too tired to be bitter about that. Almost.

The real Junktioners, the people I'd walked here among, not the bloody ganger blow-ins, were trickling back into the Junktion roadpipe. Just another bunch of dejected shapes

along a roadside. Not many to count, and not much to look at. The contrast with the boisterous Goliaths and shouting Cawdor was painful.

I found Edzon in the middle of the mob, crouching on his heel and chewing a piece of mushroom-rind. Edzon who'd told me that I'd be well away from all the shooting and had nothing to worry about. I stood over him, considered bouncing his head off the roadpipe wall with my boot, then sat down next to him instead. Funny how my hands kept twitching to smooth out my coat and tilt my hat although I didn't have either any more. I missed my coat and hat.

He took out a water-flask and shook it, but from the sound it was almost empty. He gave me a doleful look and shoved it back inside his jacket. The smell of smoke wafted over the bridge.

'How much water do you think they'll find?' I asked, eventually, for something to say. Edzon shrugged.

'Wasn't one of the bigger 'steads but who can say what their stash was like? People have finally been waking up to the idea that drinking liquor dries you out faster than it fills you up. Took about a dozen deadies in the booze-holes in the 'platz to, you know, make that point properly. So word around the bunkerhouse was that Mirror-Bitten was having a little more trouble moving its stuff than usual. Maybe that's what they're loading up on.'

'That and the gifts,' came a voice from over us. Guilder Tai was still wearing his grey and black outfit. In the bad light it looked as though his face and medallion were floating in the

air. Had to be an effect he'd tried for and practised, the pompous spitsmear.

I had an idea what the 'gifts' might be, and I was right.

'The holesteaders around Mirror-Bitten have got the message,' Tai went on. 'I've been watching them bring down bottles and food packets. They're not very gracious about it. Most of them seem to prefer putting something down at the boundaries of Walking Man and then running off.'

'You know perfectly spitting well why they're doing what they're doing, Tai,' I shot back at him, 'so why don't you stop insulting them and us by being all coy about it?' One of Tai's eyebrows curved up, and Edzon's gaze was suddenly captivated by something between his boots.

There was a moment, another, then Tai shaped his face into a smile.

Would you like to walk down the roadpipe with me a way, Kass? We can talk for a while until the whole expedition makes a start back. How about it?'

I'd always thought people only did it in jokes, but Edzon was actually shuffling away to put distance between us.

What the hell. I was Junktion's one and only lamplighter (one and only working lamplighter, sorry Nardo) so what was he going to do? I levered myself up off the floor and wiped my palms on my pants as we started down the roadpipe. I plodded. Tai sauntered. It hadn't been so long since I used to walk like that. Everybody around Junktion knew me. Kass with his hat and his tool pack and frock coat. I had a feeling I was a

different Kass now.

And after what Guilder Tai told me, I knew I was a different Kass now.



# 13: PLANS AND MANOEUVRES

To this day I don't know who else Tai told, if he told anyone. There were some people I let it out to, long afterwards, very carefully, and for a long time I didn't dare drink hard for fear of what might spill out when the Wildsnake was crawling down me.

On mat long, dred, head-hanging walk back from Mirror-Bitten, I didn't tell anyone. I didn't speak to anyone. I'd given back the clunky unfired autogun and only carried Thamm's half-size tool pack over my shoulder but it felt like more than that on my back. Felt like dead weight. Dead. Once I thought I heard Tanny's voice somewhere in the walking column but it was nothing.

It wasn't my fault. It couldn't be my fault. How could anyone know that some man, some... bastard... some...

Another voice in my head now. Not Tanny, Guilder Tai.

'I have the feeling that you're all out of pleasantries, Kass. You always had a reputation as an easygoing man who kept his head down and did his job. I have to say you're not quite what I expected.'

Classic Guilder talk, lofty and amused. The way you talk when you know you're outside every Underhive law and a

town's ransom will go on the head of anyone who so much as scratches the back of your hand.

'It won't exactly be any great secret, Kass, but I feel kindly disposed enough to warn you since we're, you know, two grown men of the Underhive putting our cards on the table. Or are cards an unwise thing to bring up, given your reputation there as well?' He laughed at his own line, light and pleasant and amiable. 'But things are going to be different. They've been changing in Junktion ever since Thaki sent that punitive raid down the Well and they're going to change more. You strike me as a man who can go with changes. You just keep your head down and do your job, don't you Kass? When there's trouble going down you just walk away from it. It's what everyone tells me you're always harping on about.'

'If we're putting cards on the table, Guilder Tai, how about you stop just fanning yours about in the air?'

'Ah, directness. Well. You can probably guess at the changes I'm talking about.'

I must have said something aloud. Tai gave me an odd look and went on talking.

'Getting the Firebrands and the Steelheads in here was stupid, at least for the town fathers. Those people aren't going to settle for a chip every few lightsons and a water stipend. Change number one. Gruett and Volk are going to be town fathers after today. Won't be a question about it. Once word gets out that Wilferra and Stope were too frightened of the gangs to order them home straight away that'll tear it.' He caught my eye. 'You didn't know that? Wilferra tried to order

Gruett away from his booze-up and crawled away minus three teeth. The Goliaths weren't so drunk that Wilferra's bodyguards felt up to taking them on. Why do you think everyone's out in the roadpipe waiting for this to blow over?'

I didn't answer. I remembered what Yonni had told me about Stope. He'd found his interests matched the Firebrands' for an instant and thought that that had made them friends.

'That's why I applaud the intelligence of the holestealers back there. They made sure the gangers knew they were going to roll over. The Junktion gangs are going to get stronger and they're going to find uses for that strength. The Berserkers and the Curse are both high on the list, Kass. After that they'll turn their attention nineward and go after the Snaptooths, the Blue Vipers and the Razors. They don't like the idea of anyone near here being able to challenge them.'

'What about the water?' I asked. Tai laughed again and clapped my shoulder.

There's nobody in a rat's run of here that can get that water plant at the Deep running again, Kass. Believe me, it's true. Don't think your town fathers haven't tried. That was what got my attention uphived. Frantic messengers running all over the settlements offering any price you can name. Parts for the little stills aren't so hard to come by, but machinery like what was in the Deep? Machinery that can keep the water in the veins of more Underhive than you can walk through in a dozen lightsons? No.'

I remembered Safine talking about how deep and how far the Dry Season ran. How many outlets and hidden streams

those pumps had kept fed. How had we ever let them run with just a handful of bored guards? But it hadn't been my job. I was just a lamplighter. I fixed things and kept my head down. That was what I did. I couldn't be expected to...

\* \* \*

I stopped thinking about it and just walked - head down, one foot ahead of the other in the dust. I'd just done my job. That was all. How was I supposed to know? I tried to walk away from the knowledge of what had happened, just walk away, but of course it followed me, stayed on my shoulders and in my brain.

We came down to the twelveward gate along the long fungus-thatched tunnel that sank into the floor outside the town walls, with its sap-tacky decking and the long stripe-lamps that Nardo had been so good at stripping down to keep working. The tunnel came out on the far side of the gate and turned into Highborn Road, with its rustling dust-awnings overhead and clusters of reeking soup-kitchens. As we started down the road I watched the people around the gate and on the road itself scattering. Some were running, others shuffling backwards, wary, waiting to see what the gangers were going to do. Gruett and Volk as town fathers; the word would get out soon enough.

That sick feeling was coming back. I couldn't be in the

middle of all this noise around all these people. I imagined the knowledge coming off my skin like steam. The memories of that power tap sat in the middle of my brain and burned. How could Edzon and Ice-In-Her-Hand and all the others not know whose fault it was? (It wasn't my fault. I got told to find a juice cable and tap it. How could it be my fault?) The secret must be shining out of me like a beacon-lamp. I hunched down. I thought I could already hear the yells of 'it was you' and the first blows falling on my shoulders and back.

It wasn't my fault. I told myself that over and over again. But I still thought about that juice tap. High up in the

City the lights in a corridor start to flicker. A man whose manner and face I can only imagine snaps an absentminded finger.

'Do something about that, see to it'

And down the well come men in bronze armour.

'Hey you two, what's coming down? You see that?'

How could I walk away from Junktion now, knowing what I knew? Simple. I couldn't.

I couldn't walk away.

I peeled off from the column and half-ran to a hab-warren wall, held myself up by a hand, and this time I did vomit. Behind me Steelheads shouted laughter and then were ignoring me five seconds later. The Firebrands, bringing up the rear, marched past silently and didn't look at me from behind their masks. Nobody tried to make me stay with the column.

I leaned over the puddle of bile on unsteady legs until the last of them were past, and then I walked quickly away around the Black Pile to my rooms.

Over Greimplatz and Cyclops Square and along Highborn Road, the arc light gantries went dark and the ten-hour lightsout began. Nobody had given me any rounds to snuff the lights anywhere else, and it didn't bother me at all.

Nardo lay on my pallet. Every so often he would try to stretch his limbs and grunt and mutter from the pain. I had nothing much to offer except water. All my liquor was gone. When Nardo slept I cleaned and checked my laspistol, over and over again. I already missed the two-tone. I kept looking for it around the room and remembering it was locked away somewhere at the Gunnery. Remembering the look on Tovick's face on my last two visits. I'd lost his respect. I liked having people's respect.

That made me think of Tai, talking so cheerfully in the roadpipe.

'Nevertheless, Kass, there may be channels available. There are, you know, arrangements that can be made. It wouldn't be the first time that some of the old industrial plant around the Underhive has been rehabilitated. It isn't so usual this far down, but it's possible.' We were standing between the pools of dim, muddy, light, and Tai's voice was just floating out of a vague silhouette next to me. But I could tell he was wearing that amused expression. There wasn't much that the town fathers could offer me to make it worth my while, but I expect my relationship to Junktion to be a little different from

now on. More hands-on. Then it might be more worth my while to see what I can arrange,' he'd said, the anger already welling up within me.

I was trying to keep my breathing level and my hands unclenched. Why was he telling me this? The back of my mind was yammering again. Walk away from Junktion, Kass, time to walk away.

'Of course,' he said, 'when they take Shining Falls off the Curse they might decide that that's enough to keep them in water instead.' Tai chuckled as my head snapped around.

'You like the Curse, don't you, Kass? Well, they did rescue you, I suppose. And there's your rather well-known weakness for pretty faces. Don't get too attached, though. Gruett and Volk and I are going to be wanting a good tight hold on Junktion. Maybe clearing the Curse out and keeping our water coming in from Shining Falls will mean we don't need to repair the pumps at all.' He peered at me. 'Why act all shocked, Kass? Yes, I said "we", don't be stupid enough to think I don't have my own arrangements with the gangs. The

Guild will see better days out of Junktion with people we can talk directly to. Me, I say that ramping up the lift prices is a pikers' game. It's playing for toothpicks when you could be playing for hundredweight Guild chips.' And his voice was still light and pleasant, like he was discussing the odds on a bout at the Brass Pit or what breed of rat his meatcake had come from. 'Controlling the water, controlling the light, that's going to be the game. Control that and you control the trade. The old town fathers didn't get it. They didn't use it once it started, they

just panicked like everyone else.'

It hurt to think about that conversation, but I made myself concentrate. They would control the lights, he had said. Control the water, and control the light. And Heliko's thugs had whittled the lamplighters down to one man. 'We thought we'd lost our last lamplighter', Stope had said to me in the Bunkerhouse. And Tai: 'Interview over, Last of the Lamplighters.' I thought about that until sleep crept up and took me.

I dozed on the floor while Nardo lay on the pallet. I don't remember if I dreamt. I woke up thirsty at one point and checked the flasks. Nardo hadn't drunk it all. He'd saved nearly two-thirds of a flask for me. I only drank a little so that there would be some left for him. I was proud of myself for that. Then I slept again.

Lightsout ended. Ten hours of lightson, whatever that was worth with only the arc light arrays working. I supposed I'd have to go out and find out what the new fathers wanted me to do, if I wanted to keep my water ration. The thought of the new town fathers kept gnawing at me, distracting me while I tried to plan.

Nardo was well enough to sit up now. He sat and worked his arms and neck through circles, trying to feel where the worst pain was and get his blood going.

I sat across the room from him, wondering what to say and deciding nothing. He wasn't a child. He knew what he was



doing.

When I realised I was staring at the water flask, hoping he'd see me staring and tell me it was okay to take some, I ground my teeth and went out. Knives in my belt and boots and sleeves, the laspistol sitting on the pallet next to Nardo. I could dodge and stab, he couldn't.

There was a crowd at the Gunnery now. I found a quiet corner and waited while Tovick sold weapon after weapon and reload after reload. He was charging more than I'd ever seen him do and nobody much cared. The only people who got the old rate were the Steelheads and the Firebrands, and when they were in the shop Tovick's face went tight and pale. The little flophair looked admiringly at the gangers while they leant over Tovick and slammed heavy hands down on the counter and laughed as they told him to knock down his prices.

It took twenty minutes for the shop to empty. Tovick set the flophair to sorting a bag of grubby stub shells that some salvager had brought in, and stared at me with a flat expression when I told him we needed to talk. He took me into the range and closed the door so we couldn't be overheard, and stood with his arms folded as I spoke to him. His body relaxed the more I talked and I left with the two-tone sitting on my shoulder and a lizardskin bandolier of reloads giving a pleasant weight to my steps.

Outside in the Greimplatz they had corpses to raise. Spiders-Fear-Him hadn't gone into the burning pit with the

others: his body was being slung in one of the gibbets by a pack of Steelheads. As soon as it had been raised, a crowd surged forward from the 'platz's edges and began hurling scraps of metal and rockcrete. Yellow Jancy, planted squarely on her cushion-blanket almost right under the scaffolds, began shouting with laughter as the bodies swayed in the floodlights, and still laughed as the things the crowd was throwing began to drop down around her. The strung-up bodies were long past knowing the people in the 'platz were taking their revenge, but nobody seemed to care. Nobody even seemed to know what the 'revenge' was for. There was a frightened, angry taste to the air. I wondered how many people were seeing the Steelheads up there in their minds' eyes.

Two of the Greimplatz arc lights were broken. None of the Steelheads said anything about it to me as they walked past me and away. Two of the awnings stretched over us were also broken, hanging limply into the 'platz. I could see dust from the Well falling past the broken lights down into the town.

I walked away.

Yonni was in my rooms when I got back. I sat down on the floor without a word and unloaded and reloaded my pistol and the two-tone. He had brought fungus jerky and dry meatcake that tasted of road-dust. It took all my effort - practically holding my mouth closed with my hands - to make myself stop before I wolfed the lot, and let Nardo eat what he needed. He went carefully, trying to ease the load on his cracked teeth and

swollen tongue. Yonni had news.

There was no ceremony or formal announcement when anyone joined the town fathers. It was just something that happened. If you took over a room in the bunkerhouse and word went around that you were a father and none of the existing fathers did anything about it then you were in. Volk and Gruett had taken some of their chosen gangers and commandeered sections of the bunkerhouse. Word had gone around that they had joined the town fathers. None of the fathers were doing anything.

(We wondered about that last. Yonni had seen town father Brye carried out of the bunkerhouse doors with a hole in his skull, and town father Kannl had fallen from a high window-slot he'd never have fitted through by accident. Stope was catatonic with shock and fright and nothing had been heard of Harnos.)

The two gang leaders had taken up places in the bunkerhouse in different areas of different floors. I wondered what that meant. There was talk that Guilder Tai had moved himself into the bunkerhouse too, instead of staying in the warrens of Guilders' Hill. Nobody had ever heard of a Guilder doing that before.

I didn't want to hear about Guilder Tai.

Thinking about Guilder Tai made me see the dark of the roadpipe in my mind's eye and hear his voice all over again.

'Control the light?' I had asked. My voice had been hoarse.

'That was my idea. Harmos was the one who thought of using you as spies, which was stupid. But once people were thinking that even Junktion's famous lamplighters couldn't be trusted any more, well, that was just another weak point to aim through. I didn't expect anything to happen so quickly after my people spread the news, but I was impressed with how efficiently Heliko put those hits together. Who knew the man had such leadership qualities?'

Every sentence was a taunt. I shook with the effort of standing still. Thought of the other lamplighters, battered and dead. Lamplighter spies get what they deserve. Tai had put the word out. Just to stir things up.

'Oh, come on, you must have known it was Heliko behind that.' Tai had misunderstood my expression. 'Didn't you see the stash that they dragged out of one of the sheds at Walking Man? Kegs of that ugly green glow-paint that all those idiotic slogans were painted in. Why Heliko's crew dragged it all the way out here I'll never know. Still, he served his purpose. Whittled the lamplighter crew down to one man in less than half a lightson. You're far more manageable this way'

I felt a cramp in my arm and wrist and looked down. My hand was clutching the grip of my laspistol. The light wasn't bad enough for Tai to miss the movement.

'You and I both know you don't have what it takes to do that, Kass. Shoot a Guilder in cold blood in front of witnesses? Every man back there knows he'd be rich for life for bringing your head in along with the story. Whole settlements have been wiped out for less.'

'I don't like what you're doing to my town, Guilder Tai. I don't like what you sat in your rat-burrow on Guilders' Hill and planned for my town. You had all this thought up long before the raid, didn't you?'

Tai's laughter rang out again. Good happy laughter, a man who's been told a rather good joke over a drink with his friends.

'Planned? I planned this? What we did, Kass, was take advantage of an opportunity that was handed to us. The raid wasn't the start of some buried plan. The raid would never have happened if Thaki...' He stopped and looked at me again. 'But there's no way you could know, could you? I'd forgotten that. You really do think that the raid came out of nowhere. For nothing. You really didn't think of what you did, did you? I'm not talking about Junktion, Kass, I'm talking about you.'

There was something in his tone. Something like the outline of a spring-sheathed knife under the cloth of a sleeve, something like the rasp of a lashworm starting to uncoil in its wall-cyst. Suddenly I wanted more than anything not to hear what Tai had to say next.

'I've been wondering if you knew this, Kass, except that I don't think there's any way you'd ever have a hope of finding it out, and my only regret is that it's too dark out here for me to see your face when it hits you.'

He stood there at ease and waited, made me say 'Well?'  
'You won't know Vlitz Thaki.'

The one who sent the raiders down.' It was a small pleasure, watching him start, but I relished it while I could.

'How- no, I used the name myself, didn't I? Clever Kass. Well, then. Do you remember going way up through the levels about, what, fifty lightsons ago? Big trip, it would have been. Big exercise. A power reroute, making a feed from some plant buried down Helmawr knows where-'

'Yes, I remember it,' I managed, grudgingly. 'Our power was browning out. We needed another feed and I told the fathers about that one.' I hadn't liked the trip. I hated sleeping rough. The whole point of lamplighting was to have my rooms in the settlement with its light and pallet. The Ratskin map showing safe boltholes to sleep in hadn't helped much.

'Go on, Kass.'

'It was a cable tap. A bigger one than I normally do.' It had been, too. More dangerous. The cable had run up the side of a shaft where the air had been full of the juice. You could feel it. The hair on my arms stood up when I'd climbed in. I'd been so tense I'd been cramping, and not just from the drop underneath me where I'd seen the glint of web and spiders' eyes. On the really big juice cables it doesn't need metal to jump down to cook you. Thin air will do fine once you get a finger close enough.

'No more than that? Funny thing about Underhivers. The pipes and cables you all tap, the stuff you ship uphive to sell, the stuff that,' he chuckled again, 'the stuff that falls back down on you. You never really think about it much.'

'I don't need to. I've never been to Hive City. I just do my job.'

That was the best cable.'

'Did you know it went to Hive City?' Tai asked. "You must have. Harmos told me he wanted to send you to cross-connect a set of old feeds near Twodog, and you said you could take some from that big Hive City trunk instead.'

I managed a nod. The Twodog feeds were closer but they were in far worse wild zones. Roughing it there would have been a nightmare.

At that point my hand was still on my gun. I decided to leave it there.

Then Yonni spoke again and my attention was back in my rooms.

Yonni said there would still be lamplighting work, and water stipends for the lamplighters, but the new fathers were planning a new proclamation. Most of the town would be kept in darkness. The big arc arrays would stay on all the time, but the rest of Junktion would get by on one lamp per street. Heatseers and darkvisors would be impounded if seen. Only the

Steelheads and Firebrands would carry them. I had been going to ask when my next lamplighting rounds would be, but that was a joke now.

We sat in silence for a while, and then I started to talk. I didn't tell them about Tai's power-tap story, but I told them everything else. The gangers' plans. Control over water and

light, higher water-tithes and lower rations. Conquering Shining Falls to keep their own supply.

And there were other things the conversation turned to. I told them about my visit to Tovick at the Gunnery. They listened, solemnly, and Yonni left ten minutes later, full of purpose.

While Nardo slept, I cleaned the two-tone again.

During that lightsout there was a shootout near Wilferra's garden compound. The rumours as usual were quickly exaggerated to the point of stupidity, but I managed to piece it together. Two of Volk's Firebrands had been on their way up the trail to lay claim over the reservoir at its top for Cawdor use only. They'd been too late. There were already four Steelheads guarding the compound, three more in the Spyglass tower and two at the base of the trail. Neither side would back down and nobody could say who drew first. One badly gut-shot Steelhead managed to drag himself almost to Wilferra's gates before he died and the other, bleeding, staggered up the trail as his gangmates ran down to meet him. They fired thunderous heavybore autogun bursts after the Firebrand who'd survived the initial exchange but by then he was a disappearing shadow. The other Cawdor was sprawled on the ground with half his head gone and his chest and belly las-burned almost to ash.

I'd seen this coming ever since the wrecking of Walking Man. I just hadn't expected it this early.



I kept at it, though. For next two lightsons I made sure everybody saw me all over Junktion. I went up the scaffolds that Heliko's men were hanging from and let everyone watch while I repaired broken arc lights. I told the fighters from both gangs that it would be stupid to let bandits get another crack at the reservoir the way Heliko had and spent four hours on top of the Black Pile, going over all the leads and fittings for the pintle-lights and floodlights there and doing what I had to with them. I even went to the liftport gate where I'd had my first run-in with the Steelheads all that time ago and did the same, working until lightsout on the gatehouse lamps and the parapet stablights. I mapped every circuit and lead and connection I made, and I made sure Yonni had copies of everything. My head was clear and my hands sure and firm on my tools. That whispering little voice telling me to walk away from Junktion was silent now. It knew what my plans were.

The gate was almost unguarded now, just a lazy Steelhead lounging on the roof of the gatehouse and a nervous townie on the parapet who wouldn't meet my eyes. With the gangers spending their energy on one another in the town, the crowds outside the gates were starting to grow again - refugees, thin, water-starved, sitting in circles. Their heads were bowed and their postures hopeless. Not too many spoke or looked up. They weren't mobbing the gate any more, this was just as good a place as any to wait for the thirst to finish them.

I kept my mouth shut and finished my job. There wasn't much time.

After nearly two hours of searching and half a flask's worth of water-bribes I found Drengoff the poacher sprawled face down in an alley at Highdome. I didn't have time to fetch Yonni, so I got him to my rooms the way Yonni had got me, his arm draped over my shoulder and his head hanging down in front of him.

He was dehydrated and half-delirious, and we found wounds on his chest and down his ribs. We wondered how he'd got them, but who knew? Thirst was biting, violence was in the town's breath and brain. Tai's notion that Junktion would be easier to rule this way would have been funny if I hadn't had to live through it.

Nardo tried to talk to Drengoff as best he could while I cleaned off the wounds with a precious splash of water that I soaked into a strip from my old coat. It took him nearly two hours to wake up, hungry. About a heartbeat after he'd finally sat up and looked beadily about him, the last of the meatcake and a chunk of jerky I'd had my eye on were gone. The din as he slurped down his second - and our second-last - cupful of water seemed to rattle the walls.

Nardo was quick and hid the flask, so Drengoff wiped his lips and stretched flat on the floor and wanted to talk. That was fine by us.

An hour and a half later I walked Drengoff out of my rooms and back to Highdome. We walked slowly at first, but he

stepped livelier as that little bit of water brought back his spirits. I hoped it was enough. It would have to last him quite a bit further.

We parted at one of the little slot-doors in the wall below Highdome, where the mess of sixside alleys fetched hard up against the town walls. It was usually a crowded part of town, rowdy with the overspill from the rookeries. It was quiet now and the dust Drengoff and I kicked up settled quickly as we walked.

There was only one Firebrand walking the wall above us, a scrawny kid I didn't recognise carrying an autogun. An elaborate sighting monocle was built into one eyehole of his full-face black mask. He wasn't interested in Drengoff going out through the gate, just in the streets behind us. I guessed he was looking for Steelheads. That we were coming down the alley and opening one of the slot-gates was something he seemed utterly indifferent to. That was useful to know.

Before Drengoff left I gave him an autopistol that Tovick said was one of his best, a boxy, sturdy Orlock piece with two matt-grey plastic magazines. The weapon disappeared under his jerkin as he stepped through the gate. Then he winked at me and patted the carry-pouch at his hip as I swung the creaking gate closed and locked him out of Junktion. Behind me the arc lights were dimming.

Lightsout.

That night, I couldn't sleep. Guilder Tai's voice over and

over again in my head.

'Vlitz Thaki,' declared Tai as though the past minute of conversation had suddenly un-happened, 'is the Mercantile Guild Senior Deputy Comptroller of Satrapies for the Eighty-First Subdivision of the Hive City of our all-providing Hive Primus. You don't know what half of that means, but it doesn't matter. Thaki is a Guilder like me, belonging to no House. I report to men who report to him. Not a powerful man in the scheme of things, but to you, powerful enough.'

He looked at me to see if any of this was sinking in.

'Master Thaki spoke with me when I travelled uphive last. The master and some of his advisers within the Guild with whom I'm on good terms. Apparently they had a little irritation. Their lights started flickering. All the lights in the Guild chambers. Thaki's counting-houses are in the Orlock quarter and the workhouses around him were bright enough. The Guild takes its juice from separate lines, you see. Ones that go down into the Underhive.'

I thought I could see the shape this was taking. I remembered Nardo and I, sitting silently and thinking about that way to die, the second when you knew there was no escape from what was about to happen and all you could do was watch the grenade roll toward you...

The funny part is, I know for a fact that Thaki didn't say a word about Junktion. He doesn't know your town from the hole he craps into, Kass. All he said - are you listening? - all he said was "do something about that, see to it". That was all. His artificers and techmen cross-fed some juice and stopped

the lamps flickering, and then when they backtracked and found some Underhiver's bodged cable-tap Thaki's adjutant told one of his captains to make sure there was no more trouble from those inbred scum. It's how they all think of you up there, you know.'

The grenade was here, fizzing in front of my face, and there was nothing to do but watch as it went off...

'I don't think that the captain led the raid either, it wasn't really such a big deal.' Tai laughed again. 'It was one of his subordinates who came down your Well. I don't think Thaki even knows anything happened down here. His adjutant doesn't either, nor the captain. The only report that went back up the line was that everything was fixed, and Thaki's happy because his lights aren't flickering any more. That should mean something to you as a lamplighter, shouldn't it? The lights are running again. So it's all for the best.' Another laugh.

'I'm going to see how the party over in Mirror-Bitten is going, Kass, and when myself and the new town fathers are ready we're going to go happily back to Junktion, and if you want to get indignant about any of this then why don't you just have a think back over whose handiwork the whole mess was, back in the beginning? Do we understand each other?'

Humming to himself, Guilder Tai walked up the roadpipe. His shape swam into clarity as he moved under the light and then he disappeared through the cavity to the Mirror-Bitten bridge.

For a moment I thought I was going to vomit again, but the sensation passed. I stood there in the darkness until my legs

went and I sat down hard, and then I sat on the roadpipe floor, my arms and face and mind stiff and numb.

Lightson.

I wasn't looking forward to going back to the bunkerhouse, but Yonni was going in there almost every day and I owed it to him to work up the guts myself.

Nobody challenged me as I walked to the doors, still broken from the raid. There were stringlights looped between poles around the house now, but nobody had seen to them and the bright necklaces of glare-bulbs were weaker, dimmer, gapped like broken teeth. The space around the bunkerhouse had been eerie enough when it was empty of people, but now it was darker than I'd ever seen it. Keeping the stringlights running had used to be at the top of all our daily rounds, the town fathers didn't care what else had been going on.

Still, I wasn't frightened as I walked up the stairs to the Bootlickers' Gallery. I was even a little curious: I wanted to see if the house really had been divided into the armed camps that Yonni had described. But I never got that high up.

Town father Stope was sitting on the floor by the top of the stairs. If I'd wanted to walk up off the top of the flight and out onto the Gallery I'd have had to climb over his legs. On a good day his gross body at least managed to make him look powerful, frightening. Now he seemed rotten and melted, as though his flesh was about to run down his body and puddle on the floor around him. I could see ugly red scar-pocks over

his ears now, where the inflammation had never settled: some time when he was younger he'd been attacked by sinker-worms. His breath wheezed and whistled.

'Kass, tell Volk you'll... you'll keep working. It's important, Kass.' He panted for a moment. 'Kass, they think the Steelheads are going... to...!' He gulped. Try and get you. Just for their parts, of... Jun-Junktion. They say I'm to... deal... with you and...!' He wheezed, and again. '...Yonni. They'll have the... Black Pile reser... voir soon and then they can... promise you...'

'Promise me water. What about you, Stope? Why are you out here? Won't they call an apothecary for you? Didn't the town fathers always have their own medicine men?'

'Killed him. Burned... medicine man.' Wheeze. 'Said he was... witchdoctor. Sinful. Trafficking with... unclean...!' Stope flapped a hand at me. I got his meaning. They want to clean me, Kass. They want to... they think I'm...!' Distress got the better of his breathing for a moment and he tried to grab my shirt-hem. I backed away a step and coolly watched him. Think I need... their kind of cleaning. Promising it to me like a., some kind... blessing. Like a favour. Think they're going to... help me...!' I could imagined what they'd offered him: the same thing they did to themselves. Scourging and branding and scarring, fasting and bleeding themselves to the point of delirium.

If I took a good steady grip on the railing I could deliver kick after kick to that fat flank. I wanted to lean into his face and scream 'What did you expect?! You decided they were

your friends because you thought they could make you powerful and you got what you deserved, but you took all the rest of us with you! What did you expect?!

Instead I thought of myself in that shaft, nervous because of all the juice thrumming under my fingers but happy because this power tap would take care of our problems for a year or five, what could go wrong? I stood over him and looked down over his shaking hulk of a body and waited for Yonni.

Stope didn't even bother trying to talk to Yonni when he came past, and the big man didn't look down at him. He just swung a long column-trunk leg over Stope's robe-skirted legs, then another, pushed past me and down the stairs. Brother Hetch came behind him, stepping over Stope with greater difficulty. His mechanical leg raked its foot along the swell of the town father's belly and made him squawk and pant all the more. Hetch had shucked his flamer, but the gun-rig he wore couldn't have been much lighter. A short shotgun hanging behind each shoulder, a brace of pistols at his hips and a belt of grenades across his barrel chest.

You've made the right choice to follow us, lamplighter Kass. Volk is very pleased. He's told me to monitor your progress. You're going to feel like a new man very soon. The rot will be burned out of you. It will hurt, but you'll be thanking us before you realise it.'

Card-player face. I looked at him.

'But for now, you work. That will do you good too. Be clear, you take orders from us, not from the Steel-heads. If you're as devoted as Yonni has told me you wish to be then you'll not



help them sink their hooks into this town any deeper. We've cleared them out of the bunkerhouse...'

Ah.

'...but they still control that reservoir and the sentry tower. They can see too much of what's going on. We have about half the gates each and, well.' He stopped. He'd been starting to tell me too much, I supposed.

Tonni says that the two of you have to work on the switching-hole where the juice lines meet.' I nodded. Card-player face. It was the story we'd worked out, although I hadn't counted on Yonni promising the Firebrands a convert to get them to swallow it. 'It's an important place,' he told me. 'It needs to be well kept. Our ability to control the streets against the Steelheads is going to depend on the work you do there.' Because of course I really needed a lecture on what the spitting switching-hole did from a one-legged gang-bastard who was going to use it to turn my town into a battle zone. The card-player face was getting harder to keep up.

'Sir, we'd better be getting on,' Yonni said in the deferential voice he'd always used with the town fathers. The hole has not been attended to for some time with all the troubles, and we should-'

'Yes. You should, then. Now'

And the rat-turd clanked after us into the bunkerhouse equipment stash while we loaded up with components and tools. It was only a short walk from there into Long-Gone Circle and to the switching hole, but it felt longer under the eyes of the Junktioners who were trying to find comfort in the

Circle's slightly cooler and moister air. It felt longer because of the Cawdor mask Hetch had given me to wear and held a gun in my face until I put it on.

The switching house where we used our piecemeal knowledge of juice tech to redirect and balance the lines, and control the web of boded taps and feeds that kept Junktion lit and humming. The first cross-switches had been set up in here before even Yonni had come to Junktion and the forest of cables had grown steadily ever since then. They grew out of the walls in humming bunches, knitted themselves into bundles or splayed apart like fingers, were strung on long racks or hung from the ceiling, threading through sparking, fizzing switch-panels. Yonni moved through it all with easy confidence in spite of his size.

I'd been going to help, but Yonni's story was working better than he had planned. As I was bending to crawl under a rack full of inverters with a juicemeter in my hand, Hetch kicked me with his flesh leg and shook his head.

'Leave it. If you're going to be a disciple of the Redemption then you'll learn to comport yourself like one. You can learn from self-abasement but keep your pride. Let the people beneath you do the work that's beneath you. You'll learn the subtleties as you go on.' I set my head and my shoulders in what I hoped was a proper pose and wondered how long I'd have to keep this up for.

But for now the pose was useful, I told myself. Hetch's

coming with us had made me nervous: a lot of the gangers who carry the flashier weapons are the ones who know their tech, and I had been thinking about traps and trick-shots I could safely try in here in case Hetch turned out to know more about what we were doing than we could allow. But a disciple was a good distraction for him. We stood together under the caged glare-bulb, Hetch occasionally giving me a comradely nod that revolted me. I was sweating under the mask, water I couldn't afford to lose, and my skin crawled at the mask's touch. I was an ace away from ripping it off my head and to hell with the deception when Yonni resurfaced from the cable nests with dirt on his hands and face.

Hetch just grunted as we walked out, but he paid attention as Yonni rewired the traps: the juice running through a strip of floor, the air-piston spikes and the choke gas grenade over the pressure plate.

This place should be guarded,' he said, 'not just trapped. It's a weak point. Volk will want a man here.' He looked at me. 'Kass, you'll stand guard. He will continue the lamplighter work. We may have to try taking this Black Pile by force soon. We're going to be stretched thin and the Steelheads will be looking for points to hit back at.' The man was clueless. Any one of the sprawled shapes in the greenish light of the Circle tunnel could be a Steelhead spy, or just someone who'd swap information for water. Hetch had been out in the badzones for too long to understand settlement ways. Good.

'Hetch, I can't stay here because we have uh-hn-' I doubled over the shotgun stock that Hetch had driven into my gut. The

hit had amazing force for a movement I'd barely registered. As I toppled forward he grabbed a handful of hair and wrenched me half-upright again.

'What you will do is learn to obey joyfully. You were given an order by a Brother of the Redeemed House of Cawdor. Learn.' He let me drop to my knees and stood over me until I'd picked myself up. I went to the door and stood there with the pistol drawn. Yonni walked away down the Circle and, after a moment of staring into my eyes, Hetch spun and went the opposite way, back toward the bunkerhouse.

I waited until his footsteps had gone, then walked quietly away from the door. When I was sure I was out of sight in the gloom I ripped the Cawdor mask off my face, threw it into the dark and ran, gulping grateful mouthfuls of air.

# 14. BATTLEGROUND

I had to move. It was happening too soon. I didn't know what Drengoff was doing or where Yonni was or what was happening inside the city walls let alone outside them. Nardo could help, but he was a long way from fully healed. As I ran my nerves hummed and spat like the cables in the switching hole.

Which way back to my rooms, then, which way? Around the trail on the sixward edge of the Black Pile, where I'd be clearly visible from the Spyglass and the sight of me running might mean questions? But how suspicious was I? All the gangers knew Kass by now. Kass the lamplighter. Kass the joke who got pushed around by everyone and never answered back. It'd be a shame not to use that.

Or through Quackstown, then cut twelveward across Highborn and past the Brass Pit? More people, more mobs, more chances for things to happen. Much closer to where the Steelheads and the Firebrands had their front lines drawn. If Hetch saw me skipping his guard duty there'd be no 'harmless little Kass' crap to save me.

That was what decided it, and I came up one of the little boltholes out of Long-Gone and went at a quick clip along the shore of the canal. The bridges, which were supposed to be strung with bright lanterns at all times, were dark masses I could just pick out by the glow from the Greimplatz arcs.

I was passing around the spur of the Black Pile when the

gunfire started somewhere in Quackstown. Loud and punishing, shots with enough grunt to them to make me flinch even from this far away. Goliath and Cawdor guns.

The Pile was dim enough that I was able to make out gun flashes. Nothing powerful at first, but then there was the chattering bellow of a heavy stubber. Then the rich yellow-white glow of a Firebrand flamer, and the crump of grenades.

I ran. All I could think of was getting into my room, putting a door between me and all this, hunkering down with the two-tone in my arms. Just for a minute. Just while I got calm. There had been too much to deal with. I realised my hand was scrubbing my face where the Cawdor mask had touched my skin.

Everybody knew something had started. It was in the air like spore dust or some kind of sour magnetism. In the ragged windows of my hab-warren the fires were guttering and most of the hanging lights were dark, but I could see movement in the windows. Hard to spot in the shadows, but there. As I got closer, breath shortening and the stitch growing under my ribs, I could make out flashes and shines of metal, throwing back what light was still coming from the top of the Black Pile: gun-barrels jutting from over windowsills and heads leaning out to see what was going on. People were arming up.

Nobody spoke to me as I clambered up through the warren to my own passageway. Standing on the metal floor still blackened from Brother Hetch's flamer-blasts, I gave a

sequence of taps on the door, a lamplighter code that we sometimes used out beyond the walls, and heard tapping back. I waited. It would take a minute for Nardo to open the door.

'It's started, hasn't it?' I wheeled around at the voice. They were standing beyond the weak ceiling bulb, a crowd of dim shapes. My memory flickered and for a moment I was talking to Enning out on the roadpipe. I almost caught myself looking for the slogan on the wall. Water for all, not just the rich.

'We can hear them fighting on the Quackstown side. Something's begun.' I thought I could place the voice although I didn't know the name. She was a tattooist with a little substreet shop-hole near the sixward end of Helmawr's Bridge. There were murmurs behind her. I could feel the tension in the air, and I remembered another slogan. Lamplighter spies got what they deserved.

'Are they killing us, or each other? Who's running the bunkerhouse now?' Another voice I half-knew. Boh? Bowe? He worked in the smoke pits fiveward of Cyclops Square, melting and remoulding plastic and rubber stripped from old Hive machinery. It occurred to me that the work of the last few lightsons might have gone smoother if I'd known some of these people better.

Then Nardo grated the shutter-door back, supporting himself on my lantern-pole with the two-tone and the reload belt in his other arm. The people in the hall must have known what had happened to the lamplighters, but I guessed they couldn't have seen it for themselves. There was a gasp at the

sight of him, sagging against the door with the bruises and welts still on his face. Yonni had splinted one of his wrists and his right eye still wouldn't open.

We got ourselves organised. Nardo had sorted what was left of my tools and Thamm's. With an elbow on my shoulder and my lantern pole in his other hand he could move well enough. We'd got him a lasgun to sling at his chest, a short-stock fast-cycle Van Saar piece that was the closest Tovick could get to Nardo's old customised one. He'd wrapped a length of flakcloth around his abdomen for want of proper armour. We were as ready as we were going to be.

There was no point in lying to the others.

'Yes,' I told them. 'It's starting, I think. Be as ready as you can. I can't tell you what's going to happen.'

There was more murmuring and they began to move. By the time Nardo and I were halfway down the passage they had all melted away, to their homes or shops or families or hiding-holes or whatever it was they felt they had to go and defend.

Think fire spreads fast in a dry lichen-field? Think plague spreads fast in an overcrowded Hive City barrack district? Watch rumour spread through Junktion some day.

We headed away from the Pile and turned onto the Haulers' Way, under the giant overhangs from the old Dome walls, their lichen forests brittle and dying now. We were on our way to the Nineward Sump, where hab-holes clustered hard against the canal banks and the sixward wall properly



began. By the time we were making a painful way over the stepping-blocks at the canal shallows there were already stirrings. People were coming out of door-hatches and along the trails cut into the rubble slopes, staring. Weapons were out here, too, pistols and blades, but none of them were raised as I helped Nardo off the blocks and up the stair-trail. The slope didn't stop, and we were climbing over people's homes on our way to the town wall when Nardo had to stop and rest.

While he did, the questions came again. A man with a hand replaced by a battered steel hook and all his front upper teeth gone, wearing a stained imitation of a scarlet Orlock bandana, propped himself on the wall below us and called up to us. I could hear him passing my answers to a muttering crowd in the narrow alley we'd just climbed out of.

Was it true the whole Greimplatz was burning? It hadn't looked like it when I last saw it. The fighting seemed to be elsewhere. Was it true Garm Heliko was leading a great army of pit slaves and scummers up through the Black Pile to make himself king of Junktion? Garm Heliko wasn't doing anything of the sort. I told them to trust me on that. Who had taken over? What was going to happen to the losers, whoever they were? I didn't know. I didn't even properly know who was doing the fighting any more.

There wasn't the purposeful moving away that had happened back outside my door. Nardo nodded to me and I helped him to his feet. We moved gingerly away along the rough base of the town wall, stopping to rest at the base of each light pylon. The man in the dirty bandana, looking

dolefully after us, fell out of view under the rockcrete overhang.

Above the long flat stretch bordering the Highdome alleys, where the slot-gates are and where I'd seen Drengoff out, there was a steep slope made of the other side of the rubble-banks that cut Highdome off from the Nineward Sump. That was where we found the wall was still guarded. We hadn't expected that.

We pieced it together later on, when we had time. The Steelheads had concentrated their numbers more than the Firebrands, and pushed the Cawdor back from the base of the Pile with a ferocious string of close assaults through Quackstown and along the dry bed of Soiled Creek. But Volk had seen the fight coming sooner and had set his men up better: the Firebrands had commanding points through Greimplatz, the bridges and the town walls. It was a strategy that damn near paid off for Volk, but it almost did for us first.

There was a crack and a bullet chopped into the slope by our feet. Nardo and I were picking our precarious way down the hill toward the flat sixward zones, making for the slot-gates. We stopped at once and tried to back up, and almost pitched over as our feet skidded in the dust and each of us spoilt the other's balance.

It was a warning shot. The Cawdor sentry on the wall was a different one to when I'd come through with Drengoff, but he was armed just as well and if he'd wanted to hit us he would have. When he shifted to reload and bear on us again I saw

his piece. It wasn't Hive City but Underhive made, a heavy single-shot stubber that loaded with a bolt and lever, the kind that holestealers call a rifle. The Firebrand peered down the barrel at us again, and I wished I'd kept Hetch's spitting mask after all. Then the sentry looked over his shoulder, back at us, away again, then ducked behind a stablight gantry for no reason I could see. He shouted something at us that I didn't catch..

'Y'hear him?' I shook my head. Nardo's hearing was sharper than mine, but he hadn't made it out either. But if the wall was still guarded things could get a lot harder for us soon. The sentry put his piece to his shoulder again and I got ready to frantically wave for him not to shoot, but then he pointed it out beyond the wall, waited a breath and fired a shot.

My heart leapt.

We started down the slope again, Nardo leaning against me for balance, the two of us clumsily keeping our empty hands stretched out to show we weren't attacking. I heard another yell, another shot of the rifle. I was close enough to hear words now but there were none, just desperation. Then the whimper and whine of lasrounds and I saw the impact flashes in the metalwork by his head and shoulder. He ducked and scrambled back to the edge of the parapet.

'Lampighter! Kass you be, the lampighter! Get this light flashing! Get it shining into the town! We need-' a stub round whickered over his head '-we need to signal. They left me no klaxon. I don't know where they are and the vermin are coming in! There should have been men on the way!' He held out an

urgent hand. 'Give me your piece, else arm and get up here! They skulk at the end of my scope range and won't come close, but with another piece up here they won't dare rush me, I said give it to me!'

'Our enemies are inside,' I told him, trying to recapture the bluff I'd used on Hetch. There's shooting at the Black Pile. Gruett betrayed us and Volk and Hetch will burn him clean.'

Then there's treachery' the Cawdor said. He was tall but too thin, the way a lot of Redemptionists get with their neurotic fasting. His mask had a band of steel across the nose and bronze hoops around the eyes. 'We need you on the wall, lamplighter, until more brethren come from the gatehouse. The Orlock reputation is a lie, these are cowards, when there are more of us they'll run and we can flense the Steelhead wretches.'

It was no trick at all to make my grin look triumphant. Orlocks. It was working! 'Nardo will fight here with you, he's good with a las. I'll get word to the gatehouse. We'll drive them back to their sinkholes!' Nardo nodded to me and I helped him lean against the wall. He was still weak and his thick brown hair was damp with sweat, but he knew what to do. I trusted him. I left the sentry nervously reloading and Nardo leaning in a slot-gate alcove. I ran away along the base of the wall and I didn't look back.

I passed two more sentries on the way to the gatehouse, both staring out into the badzones. I could tell they were getting cockier as whoever was out there (Orlocks! it was working!) stayed at the limit of the wall lights. They were right

to be cocky. Thought had gone into the Junktion town walls. The height, the lights, the wireweed, the flat dead spaces beyond. Even a well-armed attacker would take terrible losses with only the most minimal defences. Whoever was skulking around at the fringes of the lit strip were right not to come any closer.

For now. I realised I could hear gunfire in front of me through the empty alleys of Peelgut toward the liftport gate. And I also realised I was grinning again.

The first thing I saw coming out the other side of the maze of orchard-alleys was that last Steelhead sentry who'd watched me earlier. He was sprawled in a broad red puddle in the middle of the Quicklime Road. The liftport gate was definitely in the control of the Firebrands now.

Four of them were on the parapet, two aiming the working stablights out through the ruins of the shanty town and two with weapons trained somewhere beyond the wall. They were less controlled than the man we had found over the slot-gates, firing bursts and screaming oaths at targets they surely didn't have a scavy's hope of hitting.

I stopped, panting, and listened to their cries for a moment. Repent and redeem, yeah, pay for your sins, yeah, sure, bum in the afterlife you filthy... women. Women. It was working!

I wondered whether to hail them, to keep up the charade, but why bother? They hadn't seen me. I didn't need to complicate things. I moved to the wall and in under the

walkway and their sightline, timing my steps to the gunfire in case they had sharp ears. The gatehouse door was hanging open - the Steelheads had kicked it in to ransack the place for cash or water. But they had left the juice panel untouched.

The test. Time to see if my plan was good enough. My hands were shaking as I repositioned the leads and snapped connectors open and closed. Twice I had to step back from the panel and collect myself. It had sounded a lot easier sitting in my dim little room flapping my mouth with Yonni. Talk was cheap.

Enough putting-off. Nardo was out there somewhere. I made a little grunting sound and snapped a bank of switch-levers closed.

For a moment, nothing. Then a hum, a spark, two, and then the liftport gate and the Peelgut wall and the entire sixward stretch of Junktion wall fell into darkness.

The wall guard didn't stand a chance, of course. Outside the walls they knew what was coming and were ready with heatseer goggles and darkvisors. The instant the light was gone the defenders' advantages were gone too.

By the time I stepped out of the guardhouse the shouting and the fusillade from beyond the gate was already over. I looked around carefully before I flicked on my filament-lamp, but I had counted four Firebrands over the gate and now I counted three limp bundles sprawled on the walkway and another lying in the road. Breathing hard, I stepped to the little

door set into the gate, drew the bolts and lifted the bar and swung it open.

Nothing. I put the lamp carefully around the edge of the door and flashed it into the darkness. No shots. I withdrew my arm.

My heart sounded very loud to me in the darkness. I counted over two hundred beats before the voice said 'We're here' on the other side of the door and made me skip one.

Carefully, gracefully, guiding themselves by little weapon-mounted bluelights like Oordell's, the Curse came into Junktion. Their clothes and hair caught my lamp-beam in quick shouts of colour. Their faces were calm and their movements sure. Atta, Dancy, Silk. The juve-girls with their swords and pistols. Woman after woman, they spread out and took silent possession.

Safine was the last through. She stood there and watched me swing the door to, re-bar it, switch off my torch.

'We didn't think we had much reason to trust you any more,' she said after a moment. 'And I'm still not sure if we do.' I nodded. The memory of walking away from them at the gate still made my face hot.

'I trust you, though,' I said and I was surprised to realise I meant it. Safine gave a small amused noise. There was faint ghost-light spilling over us from the rest of Junktion but my eyes hadn't adapted yet.

I did a double-take. The rest of Junktion was still lit. Yonni should have had enough time by now.

'I have to go,' I said. 'I don't know if the fighting in the middle

of town is getting better or worse but I have to see to the arcs. There won't be a signal. We couldn't work out a way of providing one. Sorry.'

'This will do.' Her tone was a little easier now. 'Give us some time to move further in. What about the others?'

The Berserkers got the same letter you did. I know they were outside the wall at Highdome. A sentry saw them there. They should be over the wall by now, or through the gate if Nardo was able to open it for them. They know you're here and you know they're there. Watch out for one another.'

That didn't come out the way I had meant it. Safine gave a low laugh in the darkness and turned away to her gangers as I legged it down the Quicklime Road.

I couldn't remember when I'd run this much. My legs were rubbery and my throat felt like it had been chewed to rags. Good. If I concentrated on the sensation I didn't have to think about what might have happened to Nardo down inside the wall at Highdome, or why Yonni hadn't... No, don't think it.

Maybe he had a reason to wait. I clung on to that as I got to the top of Anselm's Alley and sagged against the corner for the red fog in front of my eyes to clear. That must be it. I could hear gunfire again now, closer too, echoing out of Greimplatz and from the twelve-ward end of the bridges, but now the fight was multiplying, throwing out sprouts and seeds. Shots and shouts echoed down from the high levels of the rookeries.

Volk's foresight almost turned the tide for him. The



Steelheads pushing back the middle of the Firebrand line were being flanked by the Firebrands that Volk had spaced out through the town and Gruett's advance was slowing. A ferocious running brawl broke out between both gangs' juves along Brotherhoods' Alley where each had tried to outflank the other, but neither side could swing that and it ended in a bloody stalemate as the firelight around them bogged down. Yellow Jancy swore to me later that she'd seen Gruett go down with her own eyes, when he tried to rush the doors of the saloon on the 'platz where a window full of Cawdor had his pack of scrappers pinned down.

All I knew at the time was that the ripples were spreading. Anselm's Alley was full as the rookeries emptied out onto the streets. There was a weapon in every hand and murder in every eye.

And they weren't particular. I had to shoot two before I was halfway down the Alley, and it made me furious. I dodged cleaver-swings and fired the laspistol from the hip, and knocking them down, dead or out of it, I didn't care. As I hurdled them and kept running I found myself shouting at the other poor grey shapes propped up on the doors and steps, coming out for the fighting, turning their bleary eyes and chapped lips to watch the lamplighter run by.

'Out of the way you idiot spitters! I'm doing this for you! Out of the way! We've got one shot!' I frightened myself saying that, but it was true. The Steelheads and the Firebrands were dug in to fight one another but they'd be just as well placed to turn on the Berserkers and the Curse. And they knew Junktion

better and had recent practice fighting side by side. Yonni and I had known we needed to even the odds somehow.

'Out of the way! You want water? Help me bring those bastards down and we'll have it!' What the hell was I promising? I didn't know or care. My mouth was in free fall. I cleared the alley ahead of me with the sheer force of hot words. 'Out of my way! Coming through! Coming through!'

Momentum carried me out of the alley mouth. I almost flew headlong over a dozen sprawled bodies before I caromed off a lantern pole and switched direction past the bunkerhouse, down to the switching hole.

I found Yonni sitting against the wall of Long-Gone Circle just before the walls curved overhead and it became a full tunnel. He had his knees drawn up and his hands clasped over his belly. I recognised the posture. Gut shot.

And I found someone else too. There was a slouching, lanky shape standing over him cackling out loud. My footsteps were loud, loud enough to be heard, and he turned and stared at me, put down the foot he'd been kicking Yonni with. Those cockroach eyes looked at me from under the flop of hair he was never without. Tovick must have sent him to see how things were going. I wondered why he couldn't see this little spitsmear for what he was.

Thought you lamplighters were going to do your jobs properly from now on.' Every syllable was poisoned. There was an idiot glee at Yonni's pain in that voice that I don't think

I'll ever understand. Thought you were going to upset everything and get on top, didn't you? Thought you were going to sell out Tovick and lord it over me and... uh...'

Finishing that third sentence was a bitch, and it beat him now for the last time. There was just enough time for his expression to change as I brought the laspistol up and then the shot laid him out with a black crater between his eyes. I didn't look at him again. I crouched down and helped Yonni lift his head.

'Yonni? Yonni, is it ready to go?'

'Kass...'

'Yonni, it worked. At the gates, it worked. Drengoff got the letters to them and they're in town. The

Berserkers and the Curse, they're both here, they're going to help. They're coming. We need to kill the rest of the lights. Did you set the breakers?'

'Kass, I tried, the Cawdor...'

His words tapered off into a groan. I wanted to let him lie back, let him rest, do something other than press him to talk, but we were out of time.

'Yonni, concentrate. Please. The breakers?'

The Cawdor, right in the city. Lines behind lines, guarding, big spots...' I was frightened that he was delirious, but he was trying to explain. 'People far back, caught me... on way here... didn't get the room... he was stationed... Watch out, Kass... Hetch!'

As he said the name I ducked sideways and grabbed the two-tone off its sling. I saw the igniter light bobbing like a

glowfly in the switching-hole doorway and realised he'd been waiting, waiting for me, and now he had me.

I threw myself flat and the billow of white fire flew over my head. I felt the back of my shirt and jerkin cook and char. I fired a burst but went too low and all I got was a puff of sparks and a laugh from Hetch. I'd hit his metal leg.

I was dead. With a simple wagging motion he could fill the whole tunnel with cauterising white flame. It wasn't even worth trying to roll out of the way. I just had to make sure I took him with me. I fired a longer burst and Hetch roared in pain - I must have got him somewhere across the thighs. But he didn't drop. The igniter light did. It dropped to point right at me and the hiss of the gas jet filled my hearing.

That wasn't the gas jet.

There was an explosive cough from the doorway and I saw Hetch double over. A blurt of flame puffed and spread on the tunnel floor at his feet and the motion toppled him off balance as he stood on his wounded leg at a bad angle. He dropped to his knees.

I caught a quick whiff of a vicious, throat-hitching smell and almost laughed out loud. A round must have ricocheted and knocked the choke grenade out of the ceiling, the first and most basic trap in the passageway to the switching hole.

There was a grating whine from Hetch's metal leg as he began to stand up. I don't know how I got to my feet so fast but I was running then, running at him full tilt, firing wildly, the shots not coming close to him. I saw the tiny igniter-light and screamed as though I were already burning and then I crashed

into him, landing across the bulbous flamer barrel, grinding the muzzle into the dirty floor, snuffing the igniter out in the dust.

Hetch snarled and staggered to his knees again, then brought the flamer around in a full-blooded swing that connected with the side of my head and knocked me sprawling. My skull rang and suddenly my limbs seemed very heavy and very far away. There was a metallic noise and his metal foot stamped down onto my chest, making my whole body jerk and heave.

Looking up at him, I saw he had the mask he had tried to give me slung around his neck, its face nestled against his chest.

'You were never redeemed,' he told me as though I cared. 'Not all the flame and flaying in the Hive will be enough to clean you.' He gave me a kick. I was able to roll away and take some of the force out of it, but I still couldn't help yowling. Hetch was swaying on his feet and his flesh leg was slick with blood. You did a worse thing than anyone who's ever taken up arms to us. You lied to me. You promised me a disciple and then threw the mask away' He stepped forward for another kick and I scrabbled backwards to...

...the door to the switching hole. I'd got past him.

Hetch kicked out with his metal foot and I rolled onto my side and got my own in the way, catching the steel shinpipe on the sole of my boot. The shock went right up my body to the crown of my head, then I grabbed the grip of my laspistol and fired through the bottom of the holster, the beam scorching the side of my leg. It hit Hetch in the middle of his belly and

doubled him over.

I went through the doorway in a fast all-fours scramble, scored skin off my shoulder as I hit the hacked rockcrete of the wall and fell on my face an instant before I would have triggered the second trap, the trip-beam that sent the air-pistons up from the floor. I lay looking at the sockets in front of me for a dozen long breaths before my thoughts kicked in and I groped at the wall for the hidden disarm-catch. Another four to cross the trap plate, haul myself up the wall and stagger on.

There was no safety for the third trap, the electrified floor. You just had to remember to kick what looked like fixed-down matting around to cover a patch you could walk across. Doing that nearly overbalanced me onto the killing grid. I could hear Hetch was groaning outside. I shouldn't have left Yonni out there but there hadn't been time. The two pairs of gangs could come face to face any minute. I had to do my job.

I walked unsteadily across the matting and into the switching hole.

I had watched Yonni set this up. I had discussed it with him, poor Yonni. I wanted to tell him I was sorry for it all but I had no illusions. I wasn't going to find him alive. I didn't want to walk away from him, but I'd had to. I shook my head and made myself concentrate. I knew the switching hole setup. I knew what to do.

Grey fatigue. The Berserkers were the toughest gang in the district, everyone knew that. The Curse were bad too. Surely now they were in, they didn't need...

No. I had a job. I'd been telling myself ever since the whole

thing began that I just did my job. I stepped forward, and then pitched over sideways as a shell shattered the rack next to me.

'No repentance!' It was Hetch's voice. Please oh please, Helmawr's rump, what did it take to kill this sumpsack? I lay full length and yanked the laspistol out of its holster.

'No redemption! No cleaning for you! Watch my soul fly away from yours when we go there, Kass! No cleansing for you! You'll die filthy!'

Another shell punched through a cable-rack where my head would have been if I'd sat up. Solid shells, fired from a sawn-off piece by the sound of it. I stuck the laspistol over the rack and sizzled off two-three-four quick shots and was flat on my back by the time the next round came smashing through the arrays of cables and switches. I crawled like a milliasaur, humping my body up and forcing myself along the floor and around the end of a plastic frame full of juicemeter dials. The switches I needed were at head level. If I wanted to do this I'd have to stand up and-

A shot creased my shoulder and then hit the meters. Glass fragments and broken dials tinkled down around me. Ahead I could see the three big switch-levers. Yonni had marked them with yellow tape. He'd rubbed grease into the tape to make it look old, unsuspecting. Yonni was a good man. I'd been lucky to know him. I crawled forward as a shell came through low and split cables a fingers' length above my head. Fat white

sparks rained down.

I got up on my knees and reached for the first switch, and in the doorway Hetch howled and put a round through the switch plate, showering me with shattered plastic as I fired back. The despair was creeping up on me again. I didn't understand how he couldn't be dead. And the switches, the switches were broken...

Brother Hetch came for me through the maze of fizzing, smoking equipment. Slow, painful as I had been. The sawn-off clattered to the floor.

He stood over me, blocking out the light. He drew back his metal foot for a kick that would stave in my skull.

'I burn in clean light and holy pain, and you drown in-'

His foot came around on an arc, aiming to crush my head against the rack next to me. In purest blind reflex, I whipped my head down and my cheek hit the gritty floor, Hetch's sharp metal toes scraping my face. He was swaying and off balance and his other leg was injured and the kick went over my head and embedded itself in the broken bank of juice feeds.

The sparks and arcs were right above my head and I writhed away, shouting, my hair crisping. I pushed myself away as Hetch spasmed and jerked with the juice dancing in him. His arms flailed, his hair burned. His skin started to crackle, and his fingers brushed the shattered switch.

It only worked for a moment, but it worked. The surge hit the low-strain breakers we'd taken from the depot, that Yonni had carefully worked into the switching room and I had put in the



arc light arrays, cross-routing the juice away from them until we were ready to throw the whole of Junktion's lighting grid onto our finely-placed weak points. There was a thump that I seemed to hear with my whole body, another one, a chain reaction of thumps that marched away through the switching room and out into the wall. Junktion went black. The Steelheads and Firebrands were in the dark as the Curse and the Berserkers came for them. I'd done it.

I'd done it for Junktion. For Yonni. For Sebyo and Backni and Nardo and Venz and Mudeye and Thamm. For the memory of Safine standing outside the gate watching me walk away and Bizer Enning, wherever he was, calling out to me, for Tanny, too. But mostly, at the end, it was for Sinden Kass.

I lay full length in the pitch darkness of the switching hole and laughed until my sides felt like splintering, laughed as the tears ran down my cheeks and pooled on the dirty floor.

# EPILOGUE

## WATER FOR ALL, NOT JUST THE RICH.

The words were written in glow-green paint, three feet high across a slag outcrop overhanging the Scrubtangle trail. Although the light was bright enough to properly catch the paint, it didn't leap at the eye the way it had used to do. It had taken more than a month for the paint to start fading, but in the Underhive everything corrodes.

Nardo was walking on a stick still, and the two apothecaries he trusted hadn't been able to promise him he'd ever be able to stop wearing the eye patch. He could still get vision on his left if he had to, but the eye was watery and tender and too sensitive to dust and chem-fog. So the patch stayed on.

We hefted our tool packs and I hoisted my lantern up. It was a new one, a pale slightly blue-tinted one with a globe design I didn't recognise. A trader had brought a box of them through not long after the liftport had opened again. I'd mounted it on my lantern-pole under the spear-hook. I'd decided I liked the spear-hook.

Nardo and I inspected our handiwork. There was still so much fixing to do in Junktion itself, and only the two of us to do it - we had finally held the wake

for Thamm, Venz, Mudeye and Yonni the lightson before. There would be more lamplighters. The new town fathers - Grail and Crossbones of the Berserkers, an envoy of Safine's

named Pholta and their hangers-on - had told us there would be more. We had been promised the picking and training of them ourselves. But for now, Junktion was still overwhelming, even with the blown-out switching hole repaired and the biggest lighting arrays back on line. The rookeries were insanely dangerous in the dark and scawies and ratpacks were coming closer to the walls than they had in years.

In the town itself the wakes and grieving for the people the Dry Season had taken still weren't over. I felt the outline of the water-flask in my pack. That was a universal mannerism in Junktion these days, with the water Safine was carting in from Shining Falls still fetching top-notch prices. The Berserkers and the Curse had been arguing over the new rationing regime for three lightsons. Most of the argument was over how the profits were cut and what Safine's mark-up would be. The refugees who'd started trickling in again who thought 'water for all, not just the rich' was now a promise not a threat were getting nasty surprises.

The two victorious gangs had made sure everyone in Junktion knew who the winners were. Trophy masks and scalps hung over the Greimplatz like bunting, but no matter how heated the arguments between the new town fathers got they remembered what had happened to Volk and Gruett and carefully avoided coming to blows. 'Steelhead' and 'Firebrand' had stopped meaning much, anyway, since the last survivors of each had been hounded out into the badzones with packs of Junktioners on their tails. Rumour had it Volk was still alive somewhere past Chamberpit, or would be until one of the bounty killers found him. In the Cyclops Square gambling

holes the bookies were giving him three more lightsons, tops.

Stope hadn't outlived the Firebrands' overthrow. Somehow I wasn't surprised. Harmos was still around somewhere, but I didn't know how long he'd last outside the bunkerhouse. Guilder Tai had switched sides with practised smoothness. Last I had heard he was negotiating toll rights to the liftport road with the Curse and hiring a caravan to bring back salvage from the broken holesteads at Mirror-Bitten. That didn't surprise me either.

But the lights were back on. The trade was coming through again and the winches were running. Rumour was that Berserker scouts were looking for old plant downhive to rebuild Penman's Deep. We'd even found some new power feeds and had got them hooked up to supply Junktion. Things would get better.

Even the welt on my face and the bruises from Hetch's feet felt good in their way. I could look Junktion in the eye. I could look myself in the eye. Maybe I could even lay Tanny's ghost to rest. However long it had taken me to do the right thing, at the end of it all I hadn't just walked away.

'C'mon,' I said to Nardo. 'Let's get a drink.'

Meanwhile, somewhere in Hive City, the lights in Vlitz Thaki's counting house flickered off and on again.

