

TALES OF SAVAGE ADVENTURE FROM NECROMUNDA

STATUS: DEADZONE

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NOVEL

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 rockrete 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, Ulanti. 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 Delaque 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 Nobile Pax Imperator - the Triumph of Aristocracy over
Democracy**

Rites Of Passage

Gordon Rennie

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

healed long ago but down here, in the dank air of the deepest tunnels of the Underhive, it continued to trouble him, reminding him painfully of the place where, years ago, a rusted Scavvie blade brought his career as leader of the Orlock-affiliated Steel Skull gang to an end. It was time once more to deliver The Speech. He cast a shrewd eye over the fearful young faces looking at him in the dim light of the tunnel. Generations of Underhive dwellers had left their marks here, and the walls were covered in ganger graffiti: arcane symbols, faded boasts of warriors now long dead and dire warnings of what lay beyond the ancient blast-doors at the end of the tunnel. 'From here on in, you go alone,' Herek told them sternly. 'Anyone who wants to back out better speak up now. There's no shame in it. You won't be the first, and I don't expect you'll be the last...'

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

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

To his right, Mikhal, already as tall as his father and potentially as good a fighter, with just a little more experience under his belt, nodded his assent. Alongside him, Lan, as wiry and intense as a sump rat, did likewise. Both were keen and brave enough, Herek knew, but in all matters they followed Dorn, tying their fortunes to his. As he rose through the ranks of the gangs - as he surely would, if

he survived the coming ordeal -he would take them with him as able lieutenants. Herek smiled to himself fondly remembering other, similarly commanding warriors from previous years who had gone on to earn greater glories for the gang. Herek turned towards the two remaining youths. And you, young Jaal, are you and your brother ready for what waits for you on the other side of those blast doors?' Jaal Rinn shifted uneasily, barely raising his eyes from his new, ill-fitting boots. As ever, it was his brother, Mallin, who answered for him. 'Aye, Master Herek. Show us our enemies, and we will prove our worthiness to our clan.'

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

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

Jaal blushed in anger - the runt of the litter, they called him! - and spoke out, his voice shaking with emotion. 'My clan has raised me and protected me. All I ask is a chance to serve it in return and reclaim the blood debt owed to me by the murderers of my parents.'

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

THE HUNTER MOVED easily through the crumbling ruins, more at home here than it had ever been in the palaces and landscaped parks of the Upper Hive. If it had ever had a name, it had long ago forgotten it. It paused, checking the information relayed to it through its armoured body and savouring the thrill of the replay images being fed directly into its mind from the suit's memory

systems. Steel claws punching through flesh. The feel of laser bolts and bullets ricocheting harmlessly off armoured skin. The screams of its victims and the images of their faces as they died in agony.

It had been too long - scarce two hours -since its last kill. It felt its body's auto-systems activate into life at the joyous replay of those few bloody seconds. Fibre-bundle muscles twitched with life, armoured plates clicked and flexed together and its claws slowly unsheathed themselves as memory circuits sent an electronic thrill of pleasure through its body. Sensor systems flared into life, invisibly scanning the area and locking on to a distant group of targets moving through the darkness. The prey was still far off, but coming closer. The Hunter turned and moved silently towards it.

'LAN, GO AHEAD and check the way in front of us. Make sure your laspistol is armed and charged,' Dorn insisted. The juve gang crouched near a barely lit glow-globe, taking cover amongst the twisted girders of a long-ago collapsed structure. Dom barked orders as if it were his given right; he had already assumed natural command of the group. 'Mikhal, stay beside me. Mallin, cover our rear - and see that the runt doesn't get lost in the dark.'

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

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

Jaal nodded, realising the worth of his brother's words. He was afraid, but not of the coming battle. He was afraid of this place and the things that roamed its shadows. He pulled nervously at his bandanna. A strange uneasiness filled him - a gut instinct that he had come to recognise as a warning of imminent danger.

Such instincts had saved him from a knife in the back more than once, back when he was running with the younger juves of the Steel Skull's settlement, learning how to stalk and fight in the relative safety of the tunnels around the compound.

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

THE HUNTER CROUCHED in the shadows atop a ruined metal shack, watching its prey. The chameleon scales on the surface of its body-suit shifted to blend in perfectly with its surroundings. Thermally sealed inside its body-suit, it was invisible even to infra-red detection. Its armoured suit had been crafted in the finest artificier workshops of a far distant world, and the suit's enhanced adaptation systems meant that it now possessed extra-evolved abilities that not even its creators could have predicted.

The Hunter activated its own infra-red systems, watching the heat patterns of its prey dance through the darkness. Five of them. Five lost children, all alone down here in the dark. It paused to consider its options, strategy simulations composed from the stored memories of previous hunts flickering through its hard-wired consciousness. The Hunter ignored them. Memories of old kills no longer satisfied it. The prey was so close. It hungered for the thrill of fresh combat.

It leapt from its perch like a jaguar, sensor systems allowing it to track its prey's position effortlessly through the landscape of ruins. So confidently they moved, so unaware of the potential terrors that surrounded them down here! Inside the skin of its suit, the Hunter smiled. They were sent down here to learn, and so it would teach them a lesson in terror. But first, in order for the lesson to begin, they must discover the surprise that lay in wait for them at their destination. After all, thought the Hunter, it had gone to such lengths to prepare the scene, and it did not intend for such effort go to waste...

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

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

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

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

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

Dorn glanced around him, checking the positions of the rest of the gang. Mallin and his runt brother were searching amongst the bodies, but he became uncomfortably aware that Lan and Mikhal were looking to him for some sign of reassurance. As the appointed leader of the hunt, he knew it fell to him to assert his authority over the situation. An ambush,' he said, not feeling as confident as he tried to sound. 'Something was waiting for them before they arrived here. Scavvies, most likely. No ganger would kill like this, not even Cawdor scum. Whoever they were, they are long gone from here...'

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

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

carrying it kept on firing until he'd exhausted its power-charge.

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

Mallin paused, pointing towards the dead bodies around them. 'And, if it really was Scavvies that did this, why haven't the bodies been stripped of their weapons and equipment? Jaal and I have checked the area for tracks. All we can find are those of the Cawdor gangers.' Mallin stood defiant, awaiting Dom's answer. 'Then what are you saying?' sneered Dorn, running his hand over his close-cropped hair. 'That a ghost, a ghost that can walk through bullets and las-blasts, came here and killed them all?'

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

THE HUNTER WAS close, closer than any of them dared imagine. From its

position high above, perched on the underside of an overhanging walkway, it could look down directly upon them to study its prey. Watching them, selecting which one would be the first of its victims. Its sensors tuned into the sound of their voices, storing them in memory. The words were unimportant - it had been years since the Hunter spoke or listened to the voice of another human being, save the sound of its victims' screams. It listened only to the tone of their voices, realising after a moment that two of them, the two biggest, were arguing. Let them argue, it thought. As if the question of which of them led the others would make any difference to the final outcome! The Hunter chose its target, sensors zeroing in on it to study and record. This one was stronger than the others, and the rest would look to it for leadership. The other one talked bravely, but the Hunter's sensors detected the nervous beat of its heart and the frightened tone in its voice which betrayed its words.

Let these striplings follow their new leader, it thought. It would soon show them just how vulnerable they were, when he would be the first to die.

The Hunter uncoiled itself from its hiding place, scuttling along the underside of the walkway as it moved silently towards its first chosen victim.

'SPYRER!' EVERYONE GLANCED fearfully at each other as Jaal dared to mention that dreaded name. Spyrers: cruel hunters from the Upper Hive, descending down into the depths of the Underhive in packs to hunt their prey, seeking enough kills to return back up the Spyre to be recognised by their kind as rightful members of the Hive's aristocratic elite. All of the young Steel Skull gangers had heard fearful tales of the exploits of these most hated of killers, knowing that even the most battle-hardened veterans of their settlement were afraid of such enemies. But, it was whispered, there was one sort of Spyrer even other Spyre Hunters feared. The lone renegades. Those who had developed too much of a taste for death and never returned back to the Upper Hive. Instead, these lone killers remained in the Underhive, adapting to the environment of their new home and mercilessly hunting down all that crossed their path. When such a renegade was discovered, even the most bitter enemies amongst the gangs would join forces to destroy it.

'He's right, Dorn,' said Lan, panic breaking his voice. 'This is the work of a Spyrer!' Mallin nodded in agreement. 'We have no other choice. We must

abandon the ritual and return to Herek. He will know what to do. We have to warn our people that there is a Spyrer on the loose!

'No!' Dorn snarled, gesturing wildly with his laspistol. 'The test is not yet over! To return now, without any kills, would bring shame upon us all.' He paused, staring hard at the other juves and daring any of them to contradict him. 'Our enemies are dead, but we have been offered a far worthier opponent to face. The test goes on, and when we return it will be in triumph to present Herek with the head of a Spyrer!' 'This is madness, Dorn!' Mikhal interjected, trying to reason with his leader. 'Even the bravest gangers would not choose to fight such an enemy. I say Mallin is right. We should-' Mikhal's voice tailed off as Dorn silenced him with a single threatening glance. 'I am the leader here - and I say the test goes on. I thought you were loyal to me, Mikhal. Are you siding with this coward and his runt brother?' Mikhal stepped back a pace as if he had been physically struck, staring shamefacedly at the ground and unable to meet Dom's eyes.

Unnoticed, at the back of the group, Jaal's head buzzed with sudden pain. That feeling again, a sense of utter dread, only stronger now than he had ever felt before. And, with it, something else: strange alien thoughts -violent and predatory - crowding into his mind from elsewhere. Jaal's vision blurred and the ground span beneath him. Suddenly he was no longer standing with the others. He was hanging in the darkness high above, looking down on them all. His body was not his own. Instead, he felt himself sheathed in a cold metallic shell, powerful fibre-bundle muscles responding to his every move. He could hear Dom's challenge to Mikhal. See Mallin backing off his hand moving towards his pistol holster, unaware of this new danger above him. There was a rush of air. Jaal felt himself falling, no, leaping.

He snapped back into his own body. Numbed, he tried to shout out a warning as the thing descended down from the darkness towards its target. 'Main! Above you! Look-'

Too late, Mallin looked up to see the Spyrer dropping down towards him. Jaal caught a glimpse of a dark spider-like shape, its outline blurred as though it was a living part of the darkness from where it came, and then it was upon his brother. Mallin raised his weapon to fire. Something impossibly fast and terrifyingly sharp flashed through the air. Mallin screamed, the las-blast from his weapon discharging harmlessly into the air. Jaal fumbled for his own weapon. In

the split-second it took to draw it, Main was gone. More laser blasts lanced through the darkness - Dorn, Lan and Mikhal firing upwards, their shots ricocheting off stonework and girders and illuminating the hellish scene in bright flashes. Jaal caught strobing glimpses of the Spyrer carrying the screaming figure of MAUI with it back up into the darkness. At first Jaal thought the Spyrer was actually floating through the air but, looking closer, he saw the gleam of something thin and silvery reflected in the light of the las-blasts: a metallic web-line anchored to some point in the darkness above and spun out from the Spyrer's wrists, strong enough for it to carry both it and its prey out of range of its enemies' weapons. Mallin. It had taken Mallin!

Jaal sank to the ground, knowing that the others were wasting their shots and that his brother was already lost to them. With a sickening lurch, Jaal saw the object lying on the ground where, only seconds ago, his brother had stood. Mallin's severed hand, still clutching the useless laspistol in its lifeless grasp.

Jaal doubled over and retched violently, this final horror too much for his shocked senses. He had known that the Spyrer was out there. He had seen it in his mind, known it was coming after them. He should have said something earlier, tried to warn them what was about to happen. If he had, Mallin would still be alive... Dorn's boot crashed into his ribs, sending Jaal sprawling across the ground. With a shock, Jaal realised that he had been babbling to himself speaking his thoughts out aloud. 'Traitor!' screamed Dom. 'What do you mean, you knew what was going to happen?'

Dorn turned towards Lan and pointing in fury at the figure of Jaal lying at his feet. 'You heard him! You heard him say he knew it was out there. He knew, and he led it straight to us! He's one of them. A witchling! He's been in league with this thing all along!'

Witchling. Jaal knew the word. Psykers, some called them. To be so named was a death sentence, the Redemptionists ruthlessly hunting down anyone suspected of possessing such feared powers.

'Then we should take him back, Dom,' stammered Mikhal, staring at Jaal as if the youth could strike him dead at any moment. The elders should judge him. It is not for us to decide...'

'No!' Dorn raged, aiming his laspistol directly into Jaal's face. 'He has betrayed

us all and led his own brother to his death! He is a traitor, and I shall judge him where he stands!

Terrified, Jaal closed his eyes, fearing he was only seconds away from execution at the hands of the wild-eyed Dom. But the expected shot never came. Instead, he heard the sound of an echoing voice calling out from the darkness around them.

'Help me, Dorn. Help me, Jaal. Help me...' It was Mania. Mallin was still alive! Weak and in pain, judging by the agonised pleading of his voice, but still alive.

How could that be? thought Jaal. Spyrers never spare their victims. Perhaps Mallin had escaped Perhaps-

'On your feet, traitor,' said Dorn, dragging him to his feet by his clothes. 'It seems your Spyrer master still values the life of its servant.' Dorn jammed the barrel of his laspistol painfully against the back of Jaal's head and hissed into his ear in a voice full of anger and loathing. 'It has spared the life of your brother. Maybe it wants to trade his life for yours.'

'HELP ME, DORN. Help me, Jaal. Help me...' The Hunter looped the recording through its suit's vocal systems, mimicking the voice of its victim. An old trick, but one that had often served it well in the past. The trap was set. Now it would wait and see if the prey took the bait.

THE YOUNG STEEL Skull gangers moved warily through the ruins, following the distant sound of their comrade's pleading voice.

Mikhal and Lan took the lead, cautiously scanning the overhead ledges and structures for signs of their enemy. It had taken them by surprise once already. They were determined it would not do so again. Dom brought up the rear, roughly pushing Jaal in front of him, his laspistol trained on his captive's back.

Jaal stumbled, risking another blow from his ill-tempered captor. 'Dorn,' he dared to stammer, 'you're making a mistake. You're leading us into a trap. I don't know how, but that can't be the voice of Malkin out there...'

Dorn silenced Jaal with a painful prod from the barrel of the laspistol. 'Shut up, runt. Try and warn your ally that we're coming, and I'll blow you in half 'Help me, Dorn. Help me, Jaal. Help

Dorn signalled for silence, trying to get a fix on the location of the voice. There, up ahead. Through the ruins of a tumbled archway they saw a walkway across a bubbling pool of toxic sludge, its acrid vapours giving off a noxious stench. Through the poisonous mists they could see something waiting for them on the other side of the walkway.

They shuffled closer, covering their mouths to avoid breathing in too much of the fetid air. A couple of paces ahead of his fellows Lan was the first to see it. He stopped dead, barely able to believe the sight that awaited them. It was the body of MOM, hanging puppet-like from a metal web of razor-edged wire that cut through his body in a dozen places, Mallin's head lay on the ground in front of him, that same mocking voice sounding as if it was coming directly from his lifeless lips. 'Help me, Dom. Help me, Jaal. Help me...'

The Spyrer exploded out of waste pool. It landed nimbly on the walkway in front of Lan and Mikhal, its armoured body streaming with burning pollutants and corrosive acids. Jaal howled in terror as it reared up before its prey. Its sinuous body was composed of black armoured plating which flexed and locked together as it moved. Jaal was reminded horribly of the stories he had heard of the monstrous spider-things that inhabited the deepest reaches of the Underhive. Cruel diamond-edged claws extended from each of its wrists, their blades glistening with lubricants and deadly venom. Its horn-crested head swivelled round towards them and, with a sudden lurch of fear, Jaal realised that it had no face. Its human features were hidden behind the blank shell of its armour, guided by electronic senses the extent of which Jaal could only guess at. It came at them at an impossible speed before any of them had time to react. With one sweep of its claws, it cut through Lan's throat. The ganger was dead before he even had time to scream, his body hitting the walkway and his blood jetting out of him in one long spray.

Mikhal spun to bring his laspistol to bear, but the Spyrer was faster, thrusting the wrist-blade of its other hand deep into the juve's stomach. Servo-mechanisms tensed as the Spyrer lifted its still-living victim off his feet, raising him high above its head in a superhuman show of strength. Mikhal did scream, a long agonised howl from the very depths of his soul, as the Spyrer released the blade's

venom cells into his body. With a dismissive gesture, the Spyrer hurled its victim over its head, ripping the blades out from the juve's body. Mikhal landed on the walkway behind, his body already starting to convulse and contort into agonising shapes as the deadly venom coursed through his veins. Then the Spyrer turned to face its two remaining victims. 'You bastard!' Dorn hurled Jaal aside and charged the Spyrer, blasts from his laspistol ricocheting harmlessly off its armour. At the last moment, Dorn dropped the pistol and drew his knife, throwing himself at the Spyrer with a roar of defiance. The ganger crashed into the Spyrer, catching it off-balance and sending both him and his enemy backwards into the waste pool. Jaal turned and ran, knowing that Dorn's attack had been a brave but hopeless gesture. Behind him, he could hear Dorn screaming in rage and agony as he tried to pull the Spyrer down with him into the corrosive depths of the waste pool. Jaal knew the Spyrer would survive - nothing could kill it - and it would be coming after him next. He snatched up Lan's laspistol, realising the futility of the gesture but wanting to at least die fighting with a weapon in his hand.

THE HUNTER PULLED itself out of the waste pool, leaving the burning and dissolved remains of Dorn behind it. Neural links ran a damage check on its suit systems.

Its armour was corroded in several places and the burning acids had destroyed its chameleon camouflage system. In time, the suit would repair itself, but the Hunter, driven by the need to kill, was oblivious of all thoughts of rest or repair.

Even now, its last victim was escaping, and the Hunter was determined to finish its game.

JAAL RAN THROUGH the maze of ruins, knowing that the Spyrer was close behind him. He could feel its thoughts buzzing in his head; whispering horrors that he barely recognised as coming from anything human. Occasionally, he would feel his mind spiral out from under him. Then he would be inside the mind of his enemy, seeing and experiencing everything around it as it moved across the top levels of the ruins, leaping from structure to structure and scuttling, insect-like, up the sheer sides of walls and shafts. He found himself running towards a rusting metal walkway, maybe a metre wide, spanning a

chasm from some long-past hivequake, its sheer sides dropping away into nothingness. The Spyrer was hunting him, he knew, probably herding him into another of its traps. If only he could control this new ability; focus these visions that flashed through his mind...

His boots made the precarious walkway echo beneath his pounding feet. A voice in Jaal's head suddenly screamed a warning, telling him to stop. Jaal threw himself onto the reverberating walkway, seeing in an instant the deadly trap he had almost run into strands of the Spyrer's metallic web-line, strung out across the walkway. If Jaal had kept on running he would surely have been sliced apart.

A wave of terror washed through the young ganger. The Spyrer was just playing with him, toying with him like a cat until it closed in for the final kill. What chance did he, Jaal the runt, the weakling of the litter, stand against such an enemy? A dark shape swooped low over his head and Jaal felt a vibration as it landed on the walkway behind him. He hauled himself up and span around to face the Spyrer, steadying his stance on the walkway and gripping the laspistol in both hands. The nightmare stalked slowly towards him, venom-dripping weapon claws slowly extending from their armoured casings. Jaal knew he had nowhere to run. Before him was the Spyrer. Behind him, the barrier of razor-wire web. Below the walkway, on either side, a long fall into oblivion. The final trap had been sprung and the game had reached its end. A terrible sliver of ice ran the full length of his spine. 'Fear is the greatest killer of all,' the Spyrer said mockingly, perfectly imitating the voice of his dead brother. 'Conquer fear and you will be ready to call yourself a true warrior.'

At the sound of Mallin's voice, something convulsed inside Jaal's head. Fear gave way to fiery rage and hatred as he heard this creature, this foul thing, speak with the voice and words of his dead brother. His fury opened up something within him, blossoming like a match igniting kerosene. Something that had been there all along, waiting to be set free. Power - pure, unfocussed power now channelled and released by his rage. Jaal was thrown backwards onto the hard, cold metal, as he felt some uncontrollable energy erupt from his body, a wave of enormous concussive force spreading out from him in all directions. The walkway beneath his feet buckled as the aged metal was rent by the supernatural force Jaal had somehow released. With a scream he realised he was sliding down towards the Spyrer's web of razor-wire.

Jaal scabbled up the slope of the collapsing walkway, grabbing hold of a bent

support beam. Turning he saw the Spyrer leap from the shifting platform as it gave way under its feet.

A thin web-line shot out from its outstretched wrist, seeking a secure anchor to the structure at the other end of the vanished bridge. 'No. Not this time,' swore Jaal, determined that the Spyrer would not escape him. 'This time the hunt ends here.' Unthinking, Jaal raised the laspistol in his free hand, aiming not at the Spyrer but at the web-line supporting it. He reached out with his mind, focusing his expanded senses on the thin strand of metal glittering in the darkness, and pulled the trigger. A searing bolt of laser energy leapt from his gun, his mind flying out with it, leading it, taking it to its target. The shot hit true, vaporising one segment of the web-line in a flash of white-hot energy.

Caught in mid-swing, the Spyrer tumbled down into the darkness, diamond-edged claws throwing off sparks as it tore at the sheer wall of the chasm, vainly striking out to find a desperate handhold.

'Nooooo! Mallin's dead voice cried as the creature fell. 'Jaaaaaaal!'

And then it was gone, its death-scream amplified by its suit systems, an electronic screech that seemed to echo forever across the Hive Bottom long after the Spyrer itself had been swallowed by the chasm.

'HEREK? FACE IT. If Dorn ain't coming back, none of them are.' The Steel Skull gangers waiting by the open blast-doors looked more worried about losing their wagers than any real sorrow. The old man sighed to himself, and turned back toward the light. 'Very well. Seal the doors,' he ordered. 'They've had an extra day-cycle. We've put ourselves at too much risk already by waiting here so long.' Herek watched as his two lieutenants carried out his orders, and silently swore under his breath. He had lost whole parties of juves to the ritual before, but he'd had high hopes for at least some of this group. But, at the last, there would be other tests and other initiates, all of them eager to prove their manhood amidst the dangers that lay in wait on the other side of those doors.

From his hiding place, Jaal watched the gangers haul the blast doors closed. He wanted so much to shout, to run towards them, to tell Herek and the others that he was still alive, that it was over - that he was safe and just wanted to go home. But he knew that would be madness.

Everything had changed. Now that he knew what he was - a Psyker, a witchling - he knew he could never return home. Not that his step-family would mourn him, not when they had lost a real son. He was orphaned again. He was an outcast, a renegade, doomed to dwell in the darkest places with the others of his kind - the freaks, monsters and mutants of Hive Bottom.

After a long moment, Jaal turned and walked away. He did not look back at the final clank of the bolts when Herek's men sealed the doors shut behind him. Silently, he slipped off into the shadows, already welcoming the protection and anonymity they offered.