

NECROMUNDA

THE LAST VOYAGE OF
**ELISSA
HARROW**

DENNY FLOWERS



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Contents

[Cover](#)

[The Last Voyage of Elissa Harrow - Denny Flowers](#)

[About the Author](#)

[An Extract from 'Low Lives'](#)

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The Last Voyage of Elissa Harrow

by Denny Flowers

The raft drifting through the toxic waters was a humble construction, little more than a dozen barrels lashed together with bindweed. Its sole occupant, stationed at the rear of the vessel, stood awkwardly, favouring her front leg and clasping the oar tightly in both hands. Though her right arm had strength enough to ferry the raft, her left barely clung to the oar, the flesh pallid and blistered.

Elissa Harrow did not acknowledge the damaged limb any more than she heeded the pain running from hip to forehead or the absence of sight in her left eye. Her gaze was fixed forward, as though intent on some distant shore that was a mere dozen strokes further.

She did not look back, nor did she dwell on the thing at the raft's stern – the shadow that clung to the vessel. The past was dead and she could only go forward.

The sump was featureless, an ever-changing tide of effluence and toxins wreathed in smog. Still she sought a pattern in the shifting colours – signs of an outflow pipe or a drainage valve, anything that could suggest a reprieve from the endless waters. You're rowing in circles, a voice whispered from behind her.

Her grip tightened on the oar.

It wasn't real, she reminded herself, merely a manifestation of thirst and hunger, just like the tawny eyes she swore were watching her from the shadows. It was to be expected, and there was no shame in being so afflicted, but she was a noble of House Harrow, above the petty superstitions of the underhive, and she would not tolerate the delusion.

Still, the delusion had a point. She knew not the currents of the sump, and with her left arm near worthless there was little chance she was rowing straight. Most likely, she circled the lake's centre, slowly squandering the last of her strength in yet another a futile gesture.

Her gaze slid to her left wrist. She tried not to look at the twisted fingers, or the pallid skin sloughing from her forearm, focusing solely on the vambrace she wore. The metal was surprisingly untouched by the filth of the underhive, and the House symbol was still visible: a golden dagger on a field of blood. With shaking fingers she tapped a sequence across the smooth surface.

'Can you hear me?' she whispered, barely recognising the

croak that was her voice. 'Lady Harrow?'

The device had once been her link to the world above. The holo-matrix projected a facsimile of home and provided a means of communicating with her kin. But the sump had taken even this from her, and she was quite alone. Still, even if she could make contact with House Harrow, they would not provide salvation. Her stepmother had offered the occasional guidance during her quest – a scrap of information, the location of a rest hole – but even that would have been frowned upon by some of her more puritanical relatives. Until her vow was fulfilled, direct intervention was expressly forbidden. Her family would prefer she died in agony than consider something as crass as cheating.

She had almost died once already, suffocating in the bowels of the underhive, her father's killer just out of reach, his mocking smile hidden beneath a respirator. With the last of her strength, she had seized him and primed a grenade, intending the explosion to claim them both. But he had slipped from her grasp, causing the explosive to tumble from her hand. The blast had opened a path for the sump waters, and she had been borne away by the toxic tide.

A ripple passed through the water and the raft swayed beneath her feet. She shifted her weight, wincing as pain flared in her left ankle. She suspected it was broken, shattered against the bedrock. She hadn't felt it at the time, the pain meaningless against the searing agony from her burnt flesh. Darkness had crept in then, and she had welcomed it, until her body was violently expelled through a water pipe and she broke the surface scum of the lake.

Perhaps the flood had claimed the life of her father's killer too. She knew she was dying – few survived untreated exposure to the sump – but there would be solace in finding his body floating face down in the waters. At least then she would die with her honour intact.

The thought of his corpse reminded her of the shadow at the vessel's stern.

She coughed and tasted blood on her lip. If she were home in the marble halls of House Harrow then perhaps something could be done – her blood cleansed, her flesh rejuvenated – but there was little time left.

Her remaining eye glanced at the festering waters. She shivered. There was no doubt they would claim her, but she

still had a choice in her passing. A true daughter of House Harrow would choose to die on her feet, so she would continue to row until she dropped. It was all she had left.

Just let go.

The whisper came from just below the waterline. She shook her head slowly, her eye fixed on the unseen shore ahead.

It won't burn so much this time. It won't hurt as bad.

A sound bubbled from her throat, a pathetic whimper like a babe in arms. Anger flared, the last embers of a rage that set her on this path, that convinced her she could avenge her father and claim her birthright as the Head of House. She was not this trembling creature charting a blind course through the sump. She was Elissa Harrow. The only thing she feared was failing to uphold the honour of her House. Death was a far kinder fate.

But as quickly as her ire rose it faded, a spark swallowed by a deluge. Because she knew the truth. It was no longer honour that kept her standing, for there was now something she feared far more than shame.

Her gaze slipped back to the waters.

If there had been another way she would have taken it. If she still had her knife the voyage would long be over. But the blade was lost, buried in the murderer's shoulder. Perhaps it was there still. That gave small comfort.

You don't need a weapon to take a life.

'I had no choice,' she whispered, before cursing herself for responding. It was all in her head, the words creeping from snatches of half-sleep. It was a pity; she would have preferred a quieter end.

There was another ripple in the water. She anticipated it this time, using the oar to balance, her weight resting on her good leg. There was a wet thump as something collided with the rear of the raft. Elissa didn't look back, she didn't have to. She could picture the trawler's body in the waters, his skin blanched a sickly yellow by the sump. She'd assumed death would have separated him from the vessel, but a thin chain bound his wrist to the craft's stern. She could not break it, so it seemed he would accompany her for the last leg of her journey. Perhaps that was her final penance.

There had been no choice. She was almost sure of that.

Elissa knew her return to the Spire was a dream, even as the gilded coach glided soundlessly towards the great Cathedral of

House Harrow. She let the illusion wash over her, stepping smoothly from the carriage, her ripperskin boots pristine and silent against the marble floor. Ahead lay the main entrance, framed by the fresco of Saint Harriette, the patron of House Harrow. She paused by the image, a smile playing upon her lips. The living saint stood proud, armour shining like the sun, her spear held high as she vanquished the three-eyed dragon, its vile emerald blood pooling at her feet.

Her smile flickered just a fraction, the image reminding her of the filth that lay below the Spire, of the hunt that had taken her to the very depths of the underhive in pursuit of the man who had murdered her father. She had taken lives – some deserving, others less so – but in the dream her quest had not ended in failure, nor was she condemned to an ignominious death in the sump. In the dream she had claimed the head of Caleb Cursebound, the man who had defied House Harrow and slain her father.

She smiled again, striding forward gracefully, unhindered by pain or injury, her skin flawlessly radiant. The grounds were lit by the soft amber glow of dusk and her mirrorglass robes shimmered as though with the light of a stolen star. Beyond the gates lay the gardens, the foliage imported from the finest pleasure worlds in the galaxy. The scent of honey rose floated upon the breeze as she stepped across a bridge of burnished bronze. Beneath it, a crystal-clear brook babbled, the water painstakingly filtered to absolute purity.

On the far side of the bridge her family waited, clad in full masquerade finery, their faces hidden beneath exquisite masks of ivory and gold. She was unsurprised to find she was suddenly dressed likewise, her robes discarded, a half-mask not quite concealing her smile. Two dozen bondsmen fussed over the proceedings, distributing canapés and glasses of sparkling Quaddisian wine.

All conversation ceased as she approached, their focus solely on her.

She knew them all, their masks as distinct and familiar as the faces beneath. Many were as much rival as ally, a complex network of half-cousins that were as content clinking glasses as trading blades. But this was not a time for petty rivalries, for she had triumphed over House Harrow's enemies and her victory was theirs as well. Her vow was fulfilled and Lord Harrow was avenged. On this day she was hero to them all.

It did not seem strange to see Lord Harrow standing at his rightful place at the centre of the group. He was tall again, the rigours of age banished, his shoulders broad and strong, just as she remembered from her childhood. He raised his glass to her and even beneath his mask she knew he wore the smile that no other ever saw. Her heart swelled and it took all of her self-control to prevent a tear running down her cheek.

A bondsman approached, offering her a glass of the sparkling wine. Suddenly, her throat was parched, dry as ash. She suppressed the urge to snatch it, delicately plucking the glass from the tray and swirling the crystal-clear liquid. She raised the glass to her family, nodding to each in turn until only her father remained. She bowed slightly before raising both head and glass high.

He did not return the gesture.

She frowned beneath her mask and tried again.

Silence.

Her gaze crept to the glass. The wine was now a thick slurry veined with sickly green tendrils. The glass cracked and burning liquid seared her hand. She smelled her skin burning, the pain coursing through arm to shoulder to face. She screamed, tearing the mask clear, seeking the cleansing waters of the stream. But it too was mired by scum, the bronze bridge stained with a turquoise veneer.

Behind her came the sound of more breaking glass.

As one, her family had discarded their drinks, hands slipping into stained robes and withdrawing dull blades of folded steel. They advanced leisurely, their footsteps silent, as though gliding over the chipped marble. She tried to speak, to protest her treatment, but no words emerged from her throat, only the mewling of a pathetic beast. She tried to run but fell, her left ankle giving out. She rolled to her side as the figures drew close. They were little more than shadows now, staring out through cracked masks – all except her father. He still wore his mask, but his attire had shifted to his hunting clothes that she remembered from her youth. He had worn them when forming a hunting party, descending from the Spire to test his mettle against the denizens of the underhive.

She raised her hands, grasping at his wrist to fend off the blade. Her fingers found purchase on his mask and tore it free.

A single dead eye stared back at her. The other was gone,

stolen by the thrust that had ended his life. His grey skin was sallow and stretched, his mouth split in a rictus grin. He pressed the blade to her throat, and she was briefly surprised to recognise it as her own.

She awoke, curled at the aft of the boat, shivering, ashamed to find tears staining her cheek.

Perhaps it was the sump vapours that blurred the line between dream and material.

She would think herself awake and alert only for the waters to swell at the edge of her vision, some terrible creature approaching through the murk. She'd blink, swinging to face it, the oar raised like a spear. Her movements were painful, her left arm near useless.

Braced on her one good leg, she stared out across the still sump, the lake giving every impression of being devoid of life. She knew that was not the case, that terrible things prowled the depths of the sump, though so far none had shown signs of breaching the surface. Perhaps they found the upper echelon inhospitable. It must be that, she told herself.

Twice she had heard the beat of wings, and once felt a shadow pass across her face. That time she was sure that she had caught sight of something darting from her field of vision, and a lingering impression of tawny eyes gleaming in the shadows. Its face had looked almost human. The vision had seemed real enough, but she could no longer trust her eye.

The dome barely maintained a light cycle, the lurch from night to day erratic and with no discernible pattern. The dark brought a chill that the trawler's coat almost kept at bay. There had been precious little else of value on the raft – a few scattered trinkets that might be worth a few credits at a trader's post, but would be little more than refuse in the Spire. Only one piece caught her eye: a page on which a figure brandishing a spear of light faced off against a vast scaled beast, its tattered wings eclipsing the sun. It was familiar somehow, though the image was faded.

As the light shifted into a pastiche of dawn, she breakfasted – a mouthful of liquid extracted from the trawler's water condenser and the last of what she assumed was an edible fungus. The trawler had stashed it beside his crude condenser, but for all she knew it was some hallucinogen he had taken to ease his passage through the lake.

You could ask.

'No, I could not,' she replied. Her voice sounded strange, the burns to her throat distorting her words.

You do not wish to talk?

'There is no one to talk to. The trawler is dead. Whatever secrets he carried died with him.'

Then whom do you address?

She did not answer. She should not have spoken, but the voice persisted.

You take life so easily.

She tried not to react, keeping her gaze fixed on the sump.

Perhaps retrieving you from the waters was an act of charity.

'You only... the trawler only hauled me from the sump because he thought I was dead and that my corpse might have value. He would have killed me the moment he realised I lived.'

She did not know for sure. The trawler never had a chance to speak. As soon as he'd dragged her onto the raft her fist had slammed into his throat, stealing his breath. While he choked she'd seized his head, using her weight to drive it into the sump. Then it had been a matter of waiting for his struggles to cease.

How noble.

'I did what I must in pursuit of my vow,' she said, turning to the stern of the boat where the trawler floated in the water. His dead eyes stared at her.

Was that your vow? To murder an unarmed man?

The voice came from the corpse, though his lips did not move and there was no breath in his drowned lungs.

'If a lesser being must perish then so be it. That is the Harrow way.'

You don't look much like a Harrow .

There was laughter in the voice.

The spark of anger flared again. She stooped, wincing at a stab of pain in her side, seeking the chain that bound the corpse to the raft. The metal was tough, inured to the toxic sump. She turned her attention to the lock binding it to the stern, the fingers of her right hand picking at it ineffectually, the left held by her side, useless.

Problems?

She snarled, grasping hold of the corpse. It was heavier than she'd expected, bloated by the sump water, but she managed to drag the torso onto the boat, its legs still dangling in the

water. She could not cut it free, but if she smashed the bones in his hand then perhaps she could slip the chain over the trawler's wrist.

A shadow passed across the boat. She froze, glancing upwards and almost falling as a wave rocked her craft. The corpse suddenly surged against her, the pull threatening to drag her from the vessel as though the sump sought to reclaim the trawler and her along with it. She braced herself, straining with all the strength that she had left, until abruptly the pull was gone and the body slid easily back onto the raft.

What was left of it.

The trawler had been torn in half, legs ripped from the body. Bone jutted from the bloodless stumps. She froze, gaze fixed on the terrible wound, her hands still gripping his tunic. She could not remember how to breathe.

Something brushed her shoulder.

She spun, clawing at her back, and caught the glint of tawny eyes before the shadow darted from her sight. She lunged after the creature as it soared towards the raft's bow.

It was this that saved her.

The sumpkroc erupted from the waters at the vessel's stern, slamming down on the raft and pitching her from her feet. Her fingers scrabbled for purchase on the deck as she slid towards the monster's maw, snatching a handful of bindweed. She twisted her legs clear as the jaws snapped shut, barbed teeth ripping into the trawler's body. The creature tore a mouthful of flesh clear before diving back into the darkness of the sump.

The remnants of the trawler's corpse, now little more than a head and shoulder, grinned up at her, its remaining arm still firmly anchored to the stern.

They drifted, propelled solely by the tides of the sump. Elissa sat curled in the stern, her only movement to scan the water's surface, seeking any sign of the monster's return. What was left of the trawler lay on the deck beside her. She dared not risk breaking his wrist and releasing the chain, not when a ripple could summon the beast. She could not remember how a sumpkroc hunted, whether smell or sound would attract it. Perhaps neither mattered. She was marked now and wherever they drifted it could find her.

She knew how it would kill its prey, seizing it in those crushing jaws, either tearing it in half or diving to the bottom of the

sump. She had watched it with her own eyes when she'd travelled with a party of bounty hunters for a time. One of the creatures had claimed the old tracker, and she could still picture him clawing at the bank as the sumpkroc drew him into the dank waters. The tracker had treated her well in the time they'd travelled together, but she could no longer remember his name. Garak, maybe? Or Garnex?

Perhaps this was the same beast. Then again, the lake was vast – territory enough for many such predators. Did it nest ashore? Perhaps the attack meant she was close to land. Not that it mattered; she would not risk using the oar. She did not want her last moments to be spent struggling against the sump, those terrible jaws clamped around her flesh. Perhaps it was better to let the raft drift and remain silent, and pray the beast did not find her until after she had long since passed.

Prayer?

She glanced to the corpse resting beside her, the trawler's face still split in a rictus grin. He had said nothing since the attack. She had hoped the absence of lungs might have finally silenced him.

You pray for death now?

'At this moment all I pray for is quiet,' she whispered. 'Or, failing that, a means of cutting you free.'

In truth, she knew little of prayer. When House Harrow gathered in the cathedral she would perform the rituals, but paid little heed to the psalms and verse. To her mind a family gathering was just another chance to assess her rivals at close hand. A few of her cousins would bow their heads and close their eyes, giving every appearance of solemnity. Most however, like her, were more intent on sniffing out weakness and opportunity.

She could recall a few lines of a family prayer, but the services were conducted by a series of eloquent yet passionless priests and she seldom listened. Lord Harrow was careful to heed the doctrines of the Ecclesiarchy, as he did to all the Imperium's great powers, but neither he nor any other member of the family gave her the impression of being particularly devout.

Except for her mother. Her true mother. The woman who raised her, not the harlot her father anointed as the new Lady Harrow. To her mother the God-Emperor was a saviour, even if her husband saw the Church as little more than another

tiresome but necessary imposition from distant Terra. Elissa had always been her father's daughter, and like him saw the Harrow family cathedral as a repository of wealth and taste. Only the image of Saint Harriette really touched her. She had felt a kinship. Perhaps that was her mother's influence – it was the shrine she'd prayed at before she passed.

Elissa wished she knew what prayer her mother offered. All she could recall was the first verse from the Harrow Family Prayer.

'My... God-Emperor,' she started. Her voice sounded strange, as though the words were lodged in her throat.

She closed her eyes.

'God-Emperor,' she said, stronger now. 'I am of the House of Harrow. To you I pledge my life and soul, and from you I ask only the strength to crush your enemies.'

The words were swallowed by the sump. She felt there should have been more.

'...God-Emperor,' she said, clasping her hands before her. 'I ask you to forgive me my failures and free me from this purgatory.'

Still silence.

'God-Emperor,' she finally whispered. 'As I come to the end of a failed life, all I ask is that you grant me a proud death.'

Nothing.

She sighed, opening her eyes and staring out across the sump waters. She had half-expected the 'kroc to swallow her mid-prayer, but all was still. Almost peaceful.

Her gaze flicked back to the corpse beside her.

A knife was clasped in its hand.

She stared at it, unable to process the image, unable to look away lest it vanish. The blade was stained by its passage through the underhive, the steel yellowed by toxic filth, but she recognised it. It was her knife, lost during her final battle.

Tentatively she reached for it, expecting her hand to pass through the handle, but it was real, the weight comforting. She examined the blade, testing it with her thumb. It was still sharp enough to draw a bead of blood. She watched the crimson bead swell on her finger.

Had she carried the blade the whole time? Somehow forgotten it was on the raft?

'You found my blade?' she asked, addressing the trawler's body. He was silent.

No, that was absurd. The blade could certainly have been swallowed by the sump, but there was no way it could have reached the surface. The 'kroc then; that was possible. The blade had somehow become imbedded in the creature's hide, only to be dislodged during the attack. It made a sort of sense.

Except she had found the knife in the trawler's hand. He could not have torn it from the beast.

She stared at the blade. It did not matter. She could now sever his wrist, remove the chain, and send what was left of his corpse to the bottom of the sump.

She looked to her own wrist.

There was another choice – a way out of her choosing, by her own hand. No more pain.

The only thing that held her back was senseless pride. Death came to all, whether noble or hive dweller. Her father's power was nothing to it.

But he had died on his feet, and so would she.

The light shifted and Elissa Harrow greeted her last dawn cycle.

She had slept little, huddled in the stern with the oar resting beside her. Dreams and memory drifted. She saw her father laughing, his body lying in the chapel, her quarry fleeing through the mines, the rush of the sump water. The sump claimed everything in time.

Before her, at the boat's bow, the remains of the trawler bobbed in the sump, his dead smile beaming heavenwards. He was now bound to the vessel only by the remnants of his tunic, freed from both the chain and his wrist by the stroke of her blade. She'd then split the end of the oar, binding the knife in place to form a crude spear – a challenging process with only one hand. It was unlikely the weapon would remain intact after the first thrust, but given the size of the beast, there was little point in planning for a second.

She watched the sump, seeking a trail of bubbles or a ripple in the scum – some sign of the sumpkroc's passage. She had placed the bait at the fore of the raft. Assuming the beast took it, she would have only one chance to strike, one chance to wield her clumsy weapon with a single hand and on a broken ankle.

She smiled. In the muted light of the faux dawn it could be said that she'd merely chosen a more flamboyant method of

suicide. But when death came it would find her armed, and it would not just be her blood that was spilled.

The smog still clung to the toxic waters, restricting her vision to a few dozen yards. At first she did not recognise the shadow swallowing the horizon. She wondered if the dome's lumens were failing, or if something even more vile had contaminated the sump. Perhaps a cloud of noxious gas would render her whole ploy moot, but as the raft drifted closer details began to emerge: an outcrop of rock jutting from the lake; pale pink sediment drifting in the scum, cast off from the jagged shadow of the distant shore.

Land.

Her grip tightened on the oar but she did not move, instead silently trying to calculate the distance. Three dozen strokes would bring her in reach of the coastline.

She turned, scanning the waters. There was no trail of bubbles or suspicious waves, but she knew not if the beast left such signs. Perhaps it lay ahead of her, the snatch of land its nesting site. Soon she would drift into its waiting maw.

Or would she?

The currents were unpredictable, dictated not only by the geography of the lake but also the submerged network of pumps and outlet valves. The raft was veering to the right, drawn from the shoreline by an unseen undercurrent. The land was fading from view.

Perhaps the shore extended further, concealed by smog clouds? No, she knew what was happening. The raft was drifting back into the endless sump. She would idle there, spending her final hours cursing her hesitation.

She seized the oar with her good arm, the shaft cradled beneath the other, and dragged it against the current, the blade pointing Spirewards. Adrenaline powered the first few strokes, but soon she had no strength left, the shore tantalisingly out of reach. The raft rocked beneath her feet as she struggled against the sump's final attempt to claim her.

The raft crept a foot closer.

She redoubled her efforts, each breath a tortured wheeze, arms burning, head down, her gaze settling on the fore of the raft.

The trawler was gone.

She stopped. The current seized the raft, drawing it further from salvation.

The oar felt heavy in her hand, but she raised it as best she

could, the bladed end aimed at the vessel's fore. She felt the beat of wings, but it was not the reason she turned; it was the only movement there was to make, as though her action had long since been decided. Even as the sumpkroc slammed into the rear of the raft she already faced it, spear swept about, the moment almost languid. She watched, detached from her physical self, as the raft shattered against the monster's leathery hide, bindweed snapping and barrels cascading about her in a swirl of sump water, the droplets glistening vivid hues of red and green. The 'kroc's jaws spilt open in a mocking grin, wide enough to swallow her whole. She brought the spear up, the movement painful, her left arm useless, bracing herself on her one good leg. It felt familiar, as though long rehearsed. The spear plunged into the sumpkroc through its open mouth, piercing the soft palate, the beast's hunger and bloodlust causing the blade to drive deep into its brain. The oar snapped and the dying beast slammed into her, driving the air from her lungs. She was flung from the raft, tumbling through the air like a broken toy. She saw the shadow swoop past, its tawny eyes meeting her own, its expression indecipherable. Then she struck the sump, the waters almost cool against her burnt flesh. She managed to break the surface; the shore was just in sight. Three hooded figures stood on the bank, watching. As she tried to snatch one last breath, the sump swallowed her. There were voices but the words were garbled. Callused hands gripped her shoulder. She tried to speak, but the effort brought only darkness, then a blessed silence. The long-sought oblivion was ended by a burning pain in her shoulder. She managed a groan and her good eye flickered open. Hideous creatures bore down on her, their faces stretched into silent screams, flesh desiccated and long dead. She tried to rise but something clamped over her face and darkness found her again. She awoke in something resembling a bed, the rusted frame softened only a little by stiff blankets. The room was dark, the flickering light of a single candle barely etching the walls. She willed herself upright but her body would not obey the summons. Then darkness stole the candlelight.

There were whispers of dreams: the endless sump; the sumpkroc's fanged maw; tawny eyes glinting in the shadows. Twice she dreamt she was perched high above the bed with her body lying below, her wounds crudely dressed and face heavily bandaged. She could hear voices, but the tongue was alien to her – a dirge of periodic grunts.

She dreamt of her father standing in the entrance to the Harrow grounds, framed by the fresco of Saint Harriette slaying the dragon. His shoulders were bent, his frame supported by an ebony cane. She stood beside him, both of them staring silently at the expanse of metallic flowerbeds that made up the gardens. The habitat protocols had long since shifted to winter and the greenery was intentionally wilting. Petals fell onto the dying beds.

She wanted to speak to him one last time but could not think what to say.

Perhaps it was only days she spent at death's threshold, perhaps it was longer – time belonged to the waking world. But there came a point where her eye opened to find she was no longer alone. The figure seated at the foot of the bed revealed little to the candlelight. His head was hidden by a cowl and he was clad in a tunic stitched from rags, the noose knotted about his neck the only decorative element.

But she recognised him well enough. He was of House Cawdor – the bone-pickers.

House Harrow had never had contact with the deranged scrap haulers in the Spire. Even the few she'd encountered in the underhive were little more than rats skulking in the shadows, plucking petty trinkets from the filth and venerating them as relics. But their attire was distinctive enough: hooded robes and sinister masks. It seemed she had them to thank for postponing her death, though the thought was not wholly reassuring given their predilection for burning captives alive.

He raised his head as he spoke. 'Well met, Mistress Harrow.'

His voice was eloquent, untouched by the guttural tones of the underhive, though she could not place his accent.

Elissa propped herself on her elbow, wincing. The pain was still present, though dismissed to a tiresome ache.

'...well met,' she managed before her voice gave out. She could hardly speak; her throat was ash.

He rose, took a bottle from the side table and poured water into a waiting cup. The water was tepid and flush with

sediment, but she drank greedily, draining it in desperate gulps. He was close now. She could see his robes were adorned by shards of glass and metal that shimmered like stars in the candlelight. Beneath the hood he wore a face of flayed skin, the brows and lips still distinct and stretched into a hideous smile. She shivered and lowered the glass, but he gave no sign of noticing her discomfort. He stared at her bandaged arm, his expression unreadable.

'I thank you, sir,' she said, her voice a little stronger, 'but you have me at a disadvantage. I do not know your name.'

'Isaiah, milady,' he replied, nodding to her. 'Welcome back. Some of my flock did not think you would recover.'

She stared back at him with her remaining eye. 'I do not think I will.'

'You will,' he said. 'The stinger mould is doing its job, though it would work a lot better if we could remove that vambrace. It won't do much for the scars, but you should be able to use that arm again. We have also set your ankle. You will not be running on it anytime soon, but I think you will be able to walk.'

Though his words were gentle, she could not look away from the flayed mask stretched across his face. House Cawdor always wore masks but most were simple things stitched from stolen cloth.

'Please,' she said, hating the weakness apparent in her voice. 'If you know who I am then you know my life has value. Return me to my House and—'

'Your family have already announced your death,' he said, cutting her off. 'We have been keeping an eye out for the castoffs. Your people always have a clean-out before they intern the newly departed, even when there is no body to bury. We've snatched a few trinkets already. You would be amazed at how quickly they can descend to the pit of the hive.'

It made no sense to her. Her stepmother would not have declared her dead. She was the heir, the future of her House. They had told her that. It was the reason she had vowed to avenge her father, to prove her rank and title.

'...if you return me I—'

'They will not acknowledge you, not now. Who would break bread with you, or invite you to one of those lavish galas? Do you think they wish to see you hobbling across the ballroom in all your finery?'

She frowned. 'You seem to know a lot about my family.'

'I know enough,' Isaiah said with a shrug. 'All of your treasures eventually end up down here, and I spent a little time uphive when we first docked. Have you ever seen the stars?'

She shook her head.

'I did,' he continued. 'I was void-born. By His blessing I saw the galaxy. But there are things out there. Things in the darkness. Once you see them...' He trailed off.

'It does not matter,' he said, returning from his reverie. 'It all ended when our vessel landed on this hellhole of a planet. My master was to dine with the great Lord Helmawr – it was supposed be the easiest money we ever made.' He grew distant again.

'I saw him, you know. Helmawr. Emblazoned in his finery, his robes gilded, a caryatid on his shoulder. He was like a god amongst men.'

He glanced at her, his eyes blazing beneath the mask.

'If you take all that away, he's no different from the lowliest bone-picker. Even with all his power, Helmawr is but a pebble against the majesty of the God-Emperor.'

'How did you end up here?' Elissa asked.

'I don't know,' he replied. 'Perhaps Helmawr betrayed us, perhaps we cheated him. I wasn't important enough to know. But something went wrong. The ship was seized and his enforcers took care of most of the crew. My master and I ran, first to Hive City and then to the underhive. I had to do terrible things just to survive – to save him, to save us both. I should have burned for it.'

Isaiah glanced at her, his icy eyes blazing with the faith of a zealot.

'But the God-Emperor offered me a means of redemption, and though I dwell in the lowest abyss in this hellish world, though I shepherd the very worst of House Cawdor, I am grateful for the chance He has granted.'

Isaiah turned his back to her as he reached up to unclasp his mask before placing it on the bed beside him. He turned back around, his face still wreathed in shadow.

'Every day I pray for Him to guide me, that I might find something of worth for Him in this pit. And even though he does not answer, I never lose faith.'

He glanced at her, only his eyes visible beneath the hood.

'Do you pray, my child?' he asked.

'I... I have,' she said, remembering the knife.

'And did He answer?'

'Not in the way I hoped.'

'No, He rarely does,' Isaiah said with a ghost of a smile. 'But He led us to you. We found you before there was even word of your death, Elissa of House Harrow. Do you know your House's patron saint, milady?'

She did not answer. He rose, crossed the room and lifted the candle from its stand on a rusted crate. He opened the box and retrieved a roll of parchment, unfurling it reverently before her. It took Elissa a moment to recognise it, the image bleached by the sump. It was the torn page from the trawler's raft. She could make out the faint image of a warrior brandishing a spear against a terrible beast.

'This is Saint Harriette. She slew the dragon in the name of our Emperor, only to perish from the pool of pestilent blood that seeped from its wounds. Like you, she died slaying the beast, and like you, the God-Emperor chose to preserve her.'

Elissa stared at the image – an echo of the fresco in the Cathedral of House Harrow – and she finally understood.

'It was a sumpkroc,' she murmured.

'It was a sign. You have been chosen.'

'Chosen?' she spat, her rage burning away the fear. 'I lost an eye, I lost my face – I lost everything! This is how He chooses His followers?'

'The glory we gain first blinds us with its lustre,' he said, leaning closer, the candle revealing his face.

He might have been handsome once, but his skin was now marred by inscriptions, passages of holy texts carved from brow to chin. 'Outsiders do not truly understand,' he said. 'We do not wear masks to hide our faces. My once-master bore the sin of pride, and by his lead I followed. I was granted the chance to free myself of such failings, but regrettably my master found he could not accept the God-Emperor's grace. I carry his sin with me as a reminder to be better.'

She glanced to his mask of stretched skin. Realisation dawned.

Isaiah smiled. 'The God-Emperor may have marked you, but by doing so He has granted you the chance to be better. Your suffering is His gift.'

As she heard these words, something inside her broke.

'I cannot,' she said, voice cracking. 'I cannot... I was meant to

die out there, I know it. I yearned for it before the end. Then the knife appeared... It was my way out and I should have taken it. I should have taken it and let it be over. I cannot live like this. I cannot be... this.'

He watched her as she sobbed, before gently taking hold of her chin, raising her head to meet his gaze.

'Listen to me,' he whispered. 'Elissa Harrow died on the water – you carry her face and name no longer. I have prayed and you are His answer. It knows this, and that is why it delivered you to us.'

He glanced upwards. She followed his gaze.

Something was watching from the rafters – a shadow, ever so slightly darker than the gloom that encompassed it. Tawny eyes peered down at her.

'I thought it was a dream...' she whispered.

'It is a caryatid,' Isaiah said. 'It followed you, and none would risk opposing it. To anger such a creature is to assure an unpleasant demise. It seems quite taken with you.'

The creature soared downwards, landing gracefully on the bed beside her. It was holding something: a masquerade half-mask. She recognised the design, though the decorative gold leaf had been picked clean and the ivory-coloured face was stained and cracked. She could just make out a faded beauty spot beside the mouth – a golden dagger, the symbol of House Harrow.

The caryatid's mouth split open, baring its needle teeth in a manner somewhat akin to a smile.

Isaiah rose, his mask now in place again. He reached for his belt, unsheathing a blade before reversing it and offering the handle. She knew her knife well enough, even in the dark. She took it, feeling its familiar weight in her good hand.

'It is time to choose your end,' he said, turning from her. 'If you are strong enough, you should join us downstairs. It is time to pray, Sister Harriette.'

He departed, leaving her alone with the winged caryatid.

It still clutched the mask.

She studied it for a while before turning her attention to the knife. The blade was sharp enough, it would only take a moment.

Her gaze then slid to the creature sat beside her. It wore an almost human face, except for those eyes. Its pupils had swollen in the candlelight, the slits now wide enough to swallow the iris, leaving only a tawny halo, a dying star.

Her left arm was heavy, laden with the silver vambrace. But she raised it weakly, her blistered fingers closing around the ivory mask.

About the Author

Denny Flowers is the author of the Necromunda short story 'The Hand of Harrow' and novella Low Lives , featuring the characters of Caleb and Iktomi. He lives in Kent with his wife and son.

An extract from [Low Lives](#).



Four hunters departed Slag Row. Five if you counted the unbloodied rookie, though none of the others did. The trail was not hard to follow; wherever their quarry passed there would be stories, improbable deeds and daring feats. It did not concern the hunters that the accounts were mired in contradictions. All that mattered was the hunt.

The five suffered their first casualty just outside Sump City. Whilst the rest slept, Bor Meathook pressed on alone, intent on being the sole claimant of the bounty. The other hunters found his body a day later floating in a pool of refuse, unharmed if you discounted the knife wound in his chest. They knew Meathook had been arrogant and at times sloppy, but he was no amateur. Lars the Sly, the group's self-appointed leader, had seen him break a man's neck with a backhand slap; had seen him dislocate a shoulder with a vigorous handshake. The former Goliath had been a mountain of muscle, and surprisingly quick for someone his size, but his life was still ended with a single thrust. The rookie obsessed over the injury, measuring the length of the incision and the path of entry, as though cataloguing the killer's methods. The rest of the party silently paid their respects, each recalculating their share of the bounty now it would be split three ways. Four if you counted the rookie, though none of them did.

The remaining hunters continued, more cautious now. Since Meathook's death the trail had vanished, their quarry aware of the pursuit. Perhaps they would have escaped had it not been for Garak the Seeker. The old man struggled to keep pace with the younger hunters, but he had the uncanny ability to know where their prey would flee to. It would sometimes be the smallest clue – a stray hair or errant boot print. More often there was no real sign at all, and the old man would consider each route in turn before inevitably guiding them down the right path. He'd smile when they asked how, exposing a motley collection of ill-formed teeth, and explain that he'd spent most of his life running; he knew where they ran because it was where he would have run.

The hunters lost him just outside Sinkhole, the sump lake that had long since swallowed the Orlock territory of Ironcrown. The old man had been so intent on the trail he had failed to spot yellow eyes bobbing just above the surface of the toxic waters. He screamed as the sumpkroc seized him, his fingers scrabbling on the bank as he was dragged below. The rookie

fumbled for her weapon, but Lars held out his hand, motioning her to be still. There was no need for a tracker now; there was only one path left.

A few miserable souls scratched out an existence on the sump lake, cultivating fungus and trawling the waters for scraps. A handful of credits bought information, confirming their quarry's flight across the lake, and a handful more secured passage on one of the trawlers' barges. The two remaining hunters, three if you counted the rookie, wordlessly gravitated to the centre of the vessel, backs pressed together, gaze intent on the emerald waters. The trawler was unfazed, propelling the makeshift craft with a sculling oar that ended in a barbed hook. He would pause occasionally, reversing his oar to haul some trinket from the sump.

No one knew how far the lake extended. The trawler claimed to have sailed further than most. He told of a forgotten shore where twisted creatures wore the faces of men. When asked whether their quarry had headed for those shores, the trawler laughed, and told them that none dared cross the lake, for those who once tried had never returned. The rookie rightly asked how he knew of the creatures on the far shore if no one had ever returned, and the trawler smiled, his teeth surprisingly white and just a little too sharp for comfort, and said these were but stories.

Still, neither the hunters nor their quarry were interested in crossing the lake. Their focus was the island that lay at its centre.

The land mass was unstable, little more than jetsam drawn together by the currents, the toxic waters fusing it around a steel cylinder, perhaps ten feet in diameter and that much again in height, the top sealed by a bronze cap with a rich turquoise patina. Before the hive quake, back when Ironcrown was a centre of industry, the shaft had been one of a dozen used to haul valuable ore from the mines below. Now it was all that remained; the final passage through Sinkhole to the last remnant of the lost empire. It was their prey's final refuge.

For a modest fee, the trawler promised to return in three days to retrieve them. Lars threatened that reneging on the deal would have dire consequences, though in truth he knew that this would be a difficult threat to enforce.

Within the former mineshaft, a cage of corroded iron and tarnished copper was suspended on frayed cables and worn

chains. It was barely a few yards across, and heavily worn by corrosion and filth. The motor had long since fallen into disrepair, so they alternated operating the winch, two hauling on the rusted chain whilst the other rested. A single spluttering lumen was their only source of light, like a candle in darkness. Not that there was anything to see, suspended in a steel shaft deep within the sump. But they were not alone in the waters. Occasionally something would brush against the metal of the shaft – perhaps a trailing tentacle or malformed fin – and the cage would rock, the chain creaking as it sank deeper. Their third loss came during the descent. The rookie awoke to find Lars pulling on the chain alone, the body of Scrag Dry lying at his feet. Psychosis, Lars would tell her, no doubt brought on by the confines of the mineshaft and the dangers lurking in the sump. Lars had been forced to act in self-defence. A pre-emptive defence, admittedly, but defence nonetheless.

The rookie said nothing.

At the next waste valve the two of them flushed the corpse. Through the viewport they could just see it floating, suspended in the iridescent sump. Then there was a shadow, and a flash of teeth the size of a Cawdor polearm. The body vanished.

They both set to work on the chain, redoubling their efforts.

Eventually they came to a juddering stop at the bottom of the shaft. When they stepped out of the cage, they emerged into a vast cavern, having left the sump far above them.

Lars stepped from the cage, rifle slung low but always to hand, his olive-green greatcoat buttoned tight, his pockmarked face set in a sneer. The rookie followed close behind, her long-las strapped to her back. Before them lay all that remained of the Ironcrown of old: a subterranean desert of ash and crumbling stone, pierced by vast stalactites the size of mountains. They grew from the dome far above, the tips having long since pierced the ash dunes. A few rusted gantries linked some of the larger stalactites, and far above he could just make out the glow of the remaining dome lights. It was hard to imagine that above those lights were the festering waters of Sinkhole. He wondered how large a hive quake it would take to open a crack in the dome and drown them in the sump, and decided it would be best not to dawdle.

The rookie was studying the maps, trying to pinpoint the under-realm's only remaining settlement. She'd survived longer

than he'd expected, outlasting three seasoned hunters, and had acquitted herself admirably during their travels. He would still most likely kill her once they had claimed their bounty, but she was worth keeping around for now. If nothing else she might catch a stray bullet intended for him.

She caught his gaze and pointed. Before them, shrouded in smog, he could just make out the settlement of Hope's End – barely two score buildings, some welded from rusted bulkheads, others carved directly into the spoil heap. To his left a workshop was stacked with minecarts and drilling equipment. On the far side was some form of distillery, which at least raised the possibility of getting a drink. Centrally, one building stretched slightly higher than the others, presumably belonging to whoever ran the place. A crowd was gathered outside of it, and he could hear the distant echo of voices.

Lars raised his rifle, adjusting the telescopic sight. He was too far to risk taking a shot, but he could at least see clearly now. The settlement was indeed in the throes of some celebration, though it did not appear planned. People were still emerging from some of the buildings, converging on an improvised stage assembled from rusted bulkheads. On it, a bottle of Wildsnake clasped in each hand, a lone figure was addressing the crowd. He was average height, clad in a fraying shirt and tattered green scarf that had probably been the pinnacle of fashion a couple of cycles ago, his hair worn in a fading blue mohawk. His face was unremarkable until he smiled, the warmth of the expression either genuine or a flawless facsimile. Lars had the bounty in his pocket, but he didn't need to check it. The face was all too familiar.

'Caleb Cursebound,' he whispered. 'Nice to see you're enjoying yourself.'

Satisfied, he turned to the rookie, who was still adjusting the scope on her long-las.

'Quickly,' he snapped. 'Our boy seems to be making a spectacle of himself. I think we should put him to bed. Permanently.'

He grinned, pleased by the joke. Still, Caleb was only half the problem. There was a secondary target, Caleb's accomplice. He had neither her name nor picture, but he knew the ratskin would be close, even if she was proving rather elusive. He could not find her on the stage nor in the crowd. It was only when Caleb concluded his speech, his closing remarks eliciting a

roar of approval, that Lars noticed a flicker of movement on the roof of the central building. There she was, barely visible in the shadows, but he could just make out her face, the eyes framed by crimson markings that looked a little like tears. She was scowling.

'Not enjoying the party?' he said, grinning, and displaying an incomplete set of rotten teeth.

As he spoke her head snapped round, her gaze meeting his own. He flinched involuntarily. There was no way she could mark him; even a bionic eye could not spot someone at this distance, but he still felt a shiver of fear scurry along his spine. He would enjoy making her pay for that.

'You think you could make this shot?' he asked, turning to the rookie. She was still struggling with the long-las, displaying an unusual level of incompetence.

'Give me that,' he snapped, snatching the weapon from her hands. It was still a long shot. He was confident that he could pick off either of the duo, even at this range, but doing so could reveal his presence and potentially give the other target the opportunity to escape. The ratskin would be the better choice, he decided. Alone on the rooftop there was a good chance nobody would spot her fall. That would give him time to adjust his aim and take the second shot at Caleb.

He barely felt the rookie's blade slide across his throat, effortlessly parting skin and flesh beneath. He managed a gurgled scream before folding to his knees, clutching weakly at the gushing wound. Then he fell forwards and was still.

Elissa wiped her blade on Lars' shirt, sweeping up the long-las with practised grace. Through the scope she could see Caleb on the improvised stage. He raised his hands and the crowd roared again, the sound carrying to the hilltop. She felt a bubble of hate swell within her chest. For an instant her finger tightened on the trigger.

But she stopped, lowering the weapon, taking a deep, slow breath.

No.

She had pictured his death a thousand times. It would not be quick and not be clean. His last moments would be as a broken man, a pariah to the pitiful underhivers whose approval he so desperately craved.

Her fingers danced over a silver vambrace on her forearm, the metal smooth and unadorned barring the symbol of a golden

dagger set against a field of blood. The holo-matrix display blossomed into life, and she pulled up a set of coordinates half a mile hence. She slung her weapon over her shoulder and set off, leaving Lars' corpse sprawled in the ash desert. Her pace was methodical. There was no hurry. Not yet.


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