

NECROMUNDA[®]

EMP-RAH'S EYE

GUY HALEY



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Emp-rah's Eye – Guy Haley

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EMP-RAH'S EYE

Guy Haley

Flames leapt up from the half-barrel hearth and made the pictures dance. Simple things sketched in paints of pounded oxide, crushed fungi and dribble-down by-products. In the light of the fire, they moved with a sacred, secret grace.

Daubings of Mother Rat twitched on flaking steel next to the Old Builders. The High Lord of the Spire gave silent judgement from his palace up by the world cave ceiling. Over them all was Emp-rah, the protector, depicted as a single staring eye. The figures were gods of the true people, as the ratskins called themselves.

In front of the fire, close to the gods, was a man so old that even in the heat of the deep down underhive he was swaddled in a blanket woven with the patterns of fungus, rat, cogs, spin handle and other natural things. At his side sat a young girl holding a bowl of beaten metal, deep with potent medicines. She cared for him. Age clawed at his bones and his innards. The klaxons of his life ran out. He was not long from entering the Dark Cave whence no man came again.

His name was Two Tails, and he was the story singer.

Two Tails' leathery skin was broken by a net of shadow. When the grub-oil lamps were lit, he was hideous, with deep wrinkles in his flesh like rumped uphive cloth. At his throat his skin hung loose. He was bald, the brown of his scalp mottled with shiny pink blotches. What little hair he had was fine as a newborn's and as dry as a corpse's. His eyes were white and sightless. But he was far from helpless. They said he could hear and smell as sharply as a great duct rat, and that though his limbs were wasted thin as rebar, they were perhaps as strong.

He was old. Old! No one lived to so great a tally of years, not ever, but he had. He was at least forty, maybe even – an impossibility to be whispered – fifty

years old.

Five others were in the telling cave. Five braves from the clan of the Five Eyes judged worthy of the journey. Five braves for Five Eyes, that was the custom. They were young but storied already in their deeds, their wrists and necks adorned with honour jewels of rat teeth, glass fragments and threaded metal nuts.

As was the way of their kind they were totally silent, their sinewy bodies poised ready to move at the slightest threat. Yet for once their attention was not diffused through the structure of the caverns about them, rat-whisker twitching for peril, but focused, tight as a lasbeam, on the ancient man.

‘Listen,’ Two Tails said to the braves, ‘and I shall say you a story, a true tale of courage and of cunning.’ He whispered the telling, his voice a deathly croak from the Dark Cave itself, but his words... Well, his words were as sharp as plasteel ground to a killing edge. ‘Listen, and take in my wisdom. It may save your lives, in the trial to come.

‘Now,’ he said, ‘before the story, another story. Once, there was a story singer. Older even than I am now. Tuk-mar of the Shining Steel, he was called. Your grandfathers heard him sing his stories when they were babes at their mothers’ breasts. As boys your great-grandfathers heard his tales. You sit where they sat. You hear this tale from my mouth. So Tuk-mar lives, by blood’s continuation and by story, though he died thirty-five years ago. This is our way.’

Thirty-five years! Two Tails paused to let the vast span of time sink into the minds of the braves.

‘Many thousands of times did the moaning voice of the uphive wail the passing of time through Tuk-mar’s life, and many thousands more has it done so since. This is an old story, a story of power. Listen now for the secrets I shall share. You will not repeat them to others of the clan, for four of you will die, and the last, the one who returns, shall take my place here, and not say these words until his time comes, and the Dark Cave yawns its welcome to you as it yawns now at me.’

He coughed. One, two gentle huffs that turned into a throaty barking, then to gurgles and gasps for air. The girl offered up the bowl to his lips. Between corpse-breath exhalations he sipped the liquid from the bowl’s rim. The coughing subsided. He shuddered. When he continued, his voice was phlegmy.

‘Like me, Tuk-mar knew he was to die. Five braves like you were chosen from the clan, the best, the bravest, the most favoured by Mother Rat. They came to the telling cave, this cave, and were set before the story singer like you are now. They had names, like you do, and dreams and passions and rivalries. These

things will soon be gone forever. Stories catch the truest things, but none can keep the wholeness of a brave's soul, only a shadow on the wall.' He gestured back at the dancing gods. 'Their names were IkIk, who was brave, but sometime rash, and occasionally stupid. He was other things as well, but they are already lost from his shadow dance. None but I remember his passion for Ma-an, or his skill at teasing grubs from the chem-soil. And so it was with the rest. Kuma, quick but weak. An-so-ri, whose anger made him dangerous. Tu-or, who it was said was too kind for this world but whose heart hid dark desires from other men. And last of all Kopa, who never won at anything and thought he was going to follow Tuk-mar into the Dark Cave, the cave of death, as soon as his name was chosen for the trial.'

Two Tails' head swung across the small audience as if he could see their rapt expressions. One or two of the braves glanced sidelong at his fellows, wondering who would die and who would live. Two Tails tutted when he heard them move.

'It is the story singer's task to ensure the tales are kept, and sung correctly down the ladders of time. That as the klaxons wail, and the hours burn, the tales are sung and remembered. This is our history, and our soul.' He drew in a deep rattling breath. No other followed for so long that the braves leaned forward, then he wheezed out and grunted.

'When a story singer comes close to the Dark Cave, then news must be taken up, up and up!' He pointed emphatically at the low ceiling, where crushed machine parts were fossilised in the ashrock. 'Up there, to where Emp-rah looks down with His holy light. Emp-rah the protector!

'There are many caverns in existence. Not just the thousands around us, or the ones in the spire. Beyond the spire, there is the world cavern. The world cavern contains many other spires which stud its floor like ferromites. Each spire has its own caverns, and its own true people. The world cavern is so huge you cannot see the ceiling. It is hidden by the rush of mist like one finds over chem-falls. From the top of the ceiling, the holy light of Emp-rah's eye burns. The eye that knows all, and sees all.' He shifted, rheumatic fingers tapped at the dusty floor. 'But that is not the end of it. Our world cavern is only one world cavern in the greatest spire of them all, that of Emp-rah, called the great Spire of Terror! There are so many world caverns in the Emp-rah's terror spire, hundreds, thousands, millions, each with their own spires and their own caves, on and on forever.'

He let the notion sink in and listened for signs of fear, like the blind hunting centipede listens for weak prey movements in the dark to call it to strike.

'We worship Great Mother Rat, for her children dwell near us and she is

bounteous in her multiplicity of pups. Next to her love, Emp-rah seems distant. That is not His fault. It is not His business to watch every brave. His is the gravest of tasks. He protects every cave, no matter how big or how small. By the holy light of His sacred eye, He guides travellers from cave to cave across the dark spaces between. Without His eye, there would be only darkness forever, and everywhere. Think! Mother Rat gives us life, and food, and these are good things from a good god. Emp-rah is much more than this. He is the guardian of everything. He must be respected.'

Again Two Tails paused, listening for signs of unworthiness, stuttering hearts, sharp breaths, half-uttered words. There were none. He smiled.

'So, this is what IkIk, Kopa and the rest had to do, what you must do. They climbed up! Far away from our hunting grounds, uphive, yes, but further than that, through the lands of the cursed downcomers, and the fringes of the machine lands where the klaxon wail is loud enough to kill a man. Up further, up near the high heavens of the spire lords and their wrathful guardians. And then, out!'

He paused. Young hearts beat loudly in his crumpled ears.

'There, at the edge of the spire, you must call out into the world cavern. You must look into the holy light of Emp-rah's watchful eye so that He sees you, and inform Him that the Five Eyes, His children, dwell still in the caves of the caves of the great Terror Spire. IkIk, An-so-ri, Tu-or, Kuma and Kopa were given the honour of this quest. Their doom is your doom. And so, to guide you, I will tell you the story of Kopa. Because of them all, it is the best known to me.'

Settling back more comfortably into the fire's warmth, Two Tails began.

'Kopa was small, but fast. Not so fast as Kuma, but not so weak either. He was not as brave as IkIk, nor as furious as An-so-ri. He was almost as kind as Tu-or seemed, but sheltered none of his inner wickedness. Yes, a man can be wicked as well as kind. Truth is more complex than tales.

'Kopa left this cave third. Like him, you will be set on your task at intervals of one uphive wailing, according to the drawing of lots. His gear was outside this cave as yours is now – his pouch of spore bread and skin of water, his knife, his ratskin cloak, his maul, his musket, his bullet bag and his powder. One of the two braves to leave before him had kicked the others' possessions about to slow them down, and this aggrieved Kopa.

'Kopa picked up his things, cursing the time it took to set them in their proper place. For a second he considered scattering the possessions of his fellows

further, but he did not, because Kopa had a good heart.

‘He was away quickly, scurrying into the secret ways of our people, heading for Emp-rah’s light as fast as he could.

‘Young braves like you wander far through duct and pipe. In his youth, Kopa was no different, squeezing through narrow crevices into dome caves few men trod. But though Kopa had explored many hidden places, it was not long before he had gone beyond the bounds of our clan, and not long after that he had passed out of the caverns of our tribe to lands where the paths were unfamiliar, and the people speak a different way, and worship other gods.

‘Cautiously, Kopa went from the caverns of the rat into those of spider people. At that time there was war between Mother Rat and Father Spider, so Kopa kept his gun ready and his wits about him.

‘The spider people live in huge open caverns, some so big the far side hides in the dark, and the curve of the ceiling can barely be seen. Kopa kept away from signs of life, and found a way through a cave dome not much frequented. He crossed it fast, treading a plain of powder drier than bone, which hid shapes that could have been anything, or could have been nothing. He was frightened by the open air over his head, as you will be too.

“‘If I cannot bear the sight of this cavern roof,” he said to himself, “then I shall fall dead of fear in the world cave.” Kopa, not so brave as IkIk but brave nonetheless, forced himself on.

‘Darkness grew around him. Strange noises filtered through the cracks in the dome. The dust hung about him, parching his throat and cracking his nostrils. He was but half the way to the far wall, and already two shift klaxons had sung from above since he had started to cross.

‘Too tired to go on, he slept upon a high shelf of stone, hanging wire and metal around himself to warn off spiders.

‘The uphive song wailed far far away, waking him. He sat up and looked about, and saw nothing stirring in the dome of dust. The place was still as the grave. He slept again.

‘When he woke the second time he ate a little of his bread.

‘There was light in the dome, strange and constant. It had no source, and that unnerved him more and more, so he ran across the dome’s dryness, coughing on the powder his feet kicked free. It painted him all over. His nose bled. Small sips were all he took of his water to rinse out his mouth, and these he spat out, fearful of the poisons in the dust of that barren place. Nothing grew. Nothing lived. He smelled death on the wind.

‘Eventually, thirsty beyond endurance, he reached the dome’s far side. The rush of water drew him on through an ancient portal, and he emerged into a second space, where a bright river ran.

‘Water gushed from a high hole in a thin but powerful fall. The boulders around the rush were worn smooth, their reinforcing metal furred orange. In a thunderous fall the water came down not far from Kopa, running as a furious stream under a slab bridge of metal plate, where it immediately plunged turbulent into a dark lake dammed by a wall of broken stone. Far off in the lake a vortex turned, where it drained slowly into the levels below.

‘Kopa’s waterskin was slack, his throat dry. Eagerly he rushed over the bridge, unhooked his skin, meaning to fill its belly taut again in the clean flood. He swallowed dryly, a mouthful of grit down a throat of sand. But before he plunged the skin beneath the surface, a shape caught his eye.

‘There was a body face down near the water’s edge, half hidden by a boulder of ashrock. Kopa leapt up and jogged to the corpse’s side. When he rolled the body over he was met with IkIk’s sightless stare, and a face poison pale.

‘Kopa looked at the waterfall. No chemical tang or the smell of discharge hung over it. He almost drank, almost.

‘Still thirsty, he left, and went on, finding a way through the fractured rock near the fall into the spaces above the lake.

‘Another time of rest came. He found a hidden place, he set the wires about himself again, and held his weapons while he dreamed of water.

‘The next day he woke with a pounding head and dry eyes, and a mouth too desiccated to swallow bread. He passed a camp in a place of metal and dead machines that had been abandoned for some time. There he found a well. The spider people had marked it, and their signs were enough like ours for him to understand the water at the bottom was clean, and he gratefully filled his skin.

‘In this way Kopa wandered through the lands of the spider people for many klaxon songs, not once seeing any of them.

‘He wasted a long time searching for a way up from the dead and quiet lands, finding one not long before despair set in. A ladder led him up many levels before its end came, closed off by a door shut tight with melted metal. He backtracked, and left at the last exit three levels below. There he wandered a cavern full of the corpses of machinery. It was vast and dusty, and smelled of machine life recently doused.

‘Voices reached his ears. He unslung his musket, and ventured forward.

‘Around a campfire were a group of men. Kopa had seen uphivers before. He

had helped drive them away from ratskin lands. This group was bigger than any he had seen, and better armed. He was alone. So he hid, and he watched.

‘He did not understand their speech. They were wicked looking, pale but fat with good eating. They laughed with each other in the way of all satisfied hunters. At the side of their camp was a pile of ratskin cloaks and spider headdresses neatly stacked, and a jumbled heap of bags and gear. They were scalpers, hunters of the true people, evil through and through.

‘Kopa had to get out before his cloak was added to their trophies. As he was about to leave, a man with his back to him turned to pick up bread, and Kopa spied a familiar object about his neck. It was Kuma’s necklace. Kuma’s pride was a teardrop of glass. No one else had a jewel like that. Now this uphive man wore it. Anger filled him, and the desire for vengeance.

‘He slipped forward silently. Close enough that his musket would not miss, far enough to run away from murder done. He sighted carefully on the man with his dead friend’s pendant. He breathed carefully, let the gun settle into his shoulder like it were a part of his body.

‘A single squeeze of his trigger, and the man’s life ended, splattered red and grey from the back of his skull over his shocked companions. So easy, to end a life. They snatched up their guns, and shouted wildly, some shooting blindly into the dark. It was a small revenge. Kopa could not kill them all. Before the echoes of his musket’s shot had died, Kopa had fled into the small places the uphivers never see.

‘After his vengeance, Kopa slept little. There were more people in the places he walked, and none of them were of the true people, but all downcomers. From a ventilation shaft he saw a battle in an abandoned place, where hairless men fought female braves to the death. In a narrow duct he scared a scavenger hunting through a pile of scrap. They backed away from one another, weapons drawn. Kopa could have killed him, but he did no violence, and nor did the other man. They left each other warily, but unharmed. Kopa was wise. He knew that death need not rule our lives.

‘He took a risk, that is true. Many men would have killed the scavenger on sight, and who is to say they would be wrong? The uphivers hunt us. They come down from the spires, many of them driven out by the Spire Lord for crimes against their own kind. They take our caves. They are desperate men, and not lightly should any of our kind go where they are. Kopa had to. As he went deeper up into the caves the downcomers claim, he sought to evade them, but every way

seemed to bring him towards some place where they gathered together, and every time he saw them their number had grown.

‘Empty domes prowled by outcasts and scavengers gave way to the downcomers’ farms, where spore mould grows imprisoned on nets and not springing up free where the hive spirits decide, and Mother Rat’s children are imprisoned in cages. At first the farms were isolated, easily evaded, but with every thousand paces Kopa went, the downcomers’ shacks got closer together, then closer still, until their fields of wire and bars had no gaps between. Kopa was seen, and shot at, and chased, but few can catch a ratskin.

‘Soon there were cleared roads between the farms, and caravans of goods carried by enslaved men upon them. They were quite unaware of Kopa’s presence as he watched them, sometimes from a few handspans away. More farms, then places where uphivers go for the many things they do not need but covet. There were places with light kept bottled in glass, and strange music, and the reek of foolwater. Places of heat and metal where men beat steel into knives and coax life into dead machines. More and more people. People everywhere, and not the true people. Not one of them.

‘Then came the town.

‘Sheets of metal five men high made a palisade around the town. Heavily armed men guarded the gates. So much noise came from within that Kopa was afraid. He went away, skirting the edge of the town until he was on the far side and could move directly away.

‘Relief gave way to dread. He was being stalked by a careful hunter. No uphiver has the skill to track a ratskin for long. Kopa employed all his tricks to evade his follower. They were not enough. His pursuer was persistent, still following several klaxons after Kopa had left the town behind.

‘In a room off a low cavern, Kopa was caught.

““Where are you going?”

‘The voice stopped Kopa dead.

‘A man stepped out in front of him. Though he stank of foolwater and the uphivers, he was a ratskin. He spoke the language of the true people, he wore the ratskin cloak over downcomers’ clothes, and among the tools and weapons of the uphive were hung the fetishes of our kind, the bone rat, the wire spider, the warding stripes and tattoos that are pleasing to the spirits.

““Five Eyes Clan?” the man said to Kopa. Kopa nodded. It was clear from Kopa’s markings where he was from. Anyone could read them.

‘The stranger squatted down. “I am Ok-pa Talks Big. I was Snakes Running,” he said.

““Snakes Running are no more,” said Kopa. “Killed, or taken by the uphivers.”

““I am not dead,” said the man.

““Your clan lives? Where?”

““I am the last.”

““You are badskin?”

‘The man tipped his head and smiled. His teeth were black with the food of the downcomers. His scent was rotten with foreign smells. “I would be called so by your elders,” he said.

‘Kopa gripped his musket. A badskin is the worst kind of ratskin; no loyalty, no honour, no clan. All they care for is the uphivers’ worthless creds and their wicked foolwater. “What will you do with me?”

““Anything I like, boy,” said the badskin. “I am a man, you are not yet grown. I have lived among the downcomers for a long time, and I have killed many people.” He patted the uphive guns he wore at his side. “You are fresh from the whelping pit. Tell me what you are doing all the way up here. This is a long way from Five Eyes territory.”

““Nothing,” said Kopa.

““Lie if you want. I will kill you,” said the badskin. He shrugged like he meant it. He took a flask of foolwater from inside his jerkin, and swigged it hard. He offered it to Kopa. Kopa shook his head. The man shrugged again.

““One more time. What are you doing up here?” The flask went back into his uphive jerkin. One of his pistols slid out of its holster. It pointed at Kopa, like the man had nothing to do with it.

““I am on the quest of Emp-rah,” said Kopa proudly. “Our story singer is old. He will die soon. I must go up to the world cave floor and shout up to the light to let Emp-rah know Five Eyes clan still dwells in the far caves, or our story will come to an end.”

‘Ok-pa Talks Big burst out laughing and slapped his leg. Kopa looked on confused. Ok-pa’s mirth ran away from him, shouting louder the further from Ok-pa’s control it got. The badskin was crying before he stopped laughing.

““What is funny?” said Kopa.

““Life is funny,” said Ok-pa. “I have learned much here about the spire and the world cave, let us leave it at that.”

““You laugh at a sacred task. If I do not speak with the light of Emp-rah, how will he know our people still live?”

‘Ok-pa looked at Kopa strangely. Maybe something about Kopa’s sincerity touched his black heart. “You want to go to the surface?”

“I don’t want to go,” said Kopa. “I have to.”

‘Ok-pa gave him a long, hard look. His gun hovered halfway between ending the boy’s life and going back into its holster.

‘Leather rasped as he put the weapon back to sleep.

“‘Alright,” said Ok-pa. “Then I’ll show you the way.”

‘Ok-pa took Kopa away from the uphivers’ settlements. First the noise of downcomers faded, then the farms became further spaced, until towards the edge of the dome cavern there was but one last farm, long ago burned out. Ok-pa led Kopa through a door into a maze of shifting corridors, whose layout rearranged itself continuously. For a period of two klaxons they rested amid the clanking and the whirring of the labyrinth’s aged machines. Ok-pa drank his foolwater, sang uphive songs, and fell asleep. Kopa did not dare.

‘They came to the end of the moving maze six klaxons later. The noise of machines was louder than ever. To make himself heard over their clanking speech, Ok-pa leaned so close to Kopa that his foolwater breath washed over him.

“‘We leave the underhive soon. Be careful here, whelp.”

‘They went through a set of doors whose side panels shone with fake light. From the arch above a guardian skull watched through glowing glass eyes, not like the dead machines of our lands, whose lenses are broken and see nothing.

‘Ok-pa strode through. The door gargled fractured words in the uphive speech.

‘Kopa leapt back. Ok-pa laughed at him.

“‘Do not be afraid.”

“‘What does it say?” said Kopa, as the door repeated itself. He did not dare cross the threshold.

“‘It wants to know who you are. The spirits in these doors are watchful, but no one pays attention to them. This place is abandoned by the uphivers. The machines live on a while, but they will soon be dead. Still, be wary. It means we are close to the caves where the uphivers work. Come on.”

‘Reluctantly, he followed Ok-pa. There were lights here shining in the ceiling, and strange noises sounded from above. They reached a ladder lit by lights so dazzling Kopa’s eyes ran. He squinted hard, but could not see.

“‘Bright?” Ok-pa said. “You’ll get used to it.” He put a hand on one of the rungs and looked upwards to where the ladder vanished in the far away distance.

Machine noise echoed down the shaft. “Now we go up,” Ok-pa said. “We go quietly. This dome above is in use. There are many people here. Many machines. If we are seen, they will call their warriors.” Ok-pa hit his chest. “The warriors have iron skins. Your musket will not harm them, and though I will kill many of them with my uphive guns, we will be killed.”

‘Kopa nodded uncertainly.

‘Ok-pa rested a dirty hand on Kopa’s shoulder. “This world you are going to see is not like any cave you have seen before. It will be difficult for you.”

‘Kopa had no idea how difficult.

‘They climbed up and up. There the klaxons sang so loudly, the first time one sounded Kopa nearly let go of the ladder in fright. The wailing blasted down the ladder well, a great spirit warning them to go back. But Kopa had to go on, and he pushed aside his fear.

‘The noise of machines loudened. Above Ok-pa, the tube’s smooth false stone was replaced with an open metal mesh, letting in light that was red and hot. Ok-pa looked back down to Kopa and signalled with a finger to his lips. “Quickly,” he whispered, “and quietly.”

‘They hurried on, hand after hand. Kopa risked a look out of the side of the mesh.

‘There was a cave like hundreds of others he had seen, but this one was alive! All the machines, and many things he had never understood to be machines before, were working. Giant fans chopped at the air. Sprays of sparks fountained up from spinning blades. Steams of molten metal poured from great buckets into moulds, sending more sparks bouncing over the floor. Huge weights stamped down on flat metal, turning it into all manner of shapes. Giant men with muscled arms as thick as Kopa’s chest worked with enormous tools, beating plates of metal still hot from their making. It was a god’s smithy, populated by strange beings. He gawped. Ok-pa kicked his head, and shook his own, and motioned for him to climb. They passed unseen from that place into another sealed section of the shaft.

‘The din of the forge followed them some way, the heat further, funnelled up the ladder well like smoke up a chimney, and it got so hot that Kopa felt faint. Ok-pa scurried on, and Kopa dare not stop to take a drink of water or show any other sign of weakness the badskin could see.

‘A klaxon blared, shaking Kopa’s head in his skull. Suddenly the ladder ended. Ok-pa was upon the sill of door, extending his hand.

‘He hauled Kopa up.

““That manufactorum will be abandoned soon. The ash is deep above. This part of the hive is unstable. We must be careful. We must go quickly...”

““And quietly?” Kopa concluded.

‘Ok-pa smiled his black-toothed smile. “That is so.”

‘They wandered down long and crooked tunnels, some of them Old Builders’ work, some hacked through soft stone not yet set hard and smelling of uphive filth.

‘The first tremor hit them soon after. A great quaking and drop in the floor, so pronounced Kopa’s stomach lurched.

““The hive spirits are angry, we must get away from here! Have you an offering?” said Kopa.

Ok-pa motioned him to silence while he scanned the roof for weakness. When the shaking subsided, he spoke.

““It is not the hive spirits. The city itself shakes. This part is drowning in ash. The weight makes the walls shift.”

““More of your uphive nonsense,” Kopa said.

““Not nonsense, truth,” said Ok-pa. “This way we go, it goes outside the city. We are nearly there.”

““To the world cave?”

““It is not a cave,” Ok-pa insisted. “This passage here, outlaw smugglers use it to bring in spook and old things from outside, without the high lord seeing so.”

““You lie!”

““Suit yourself,” said Ok-pa. He shrugged. He drank his foolwater. Kopa scowled.

‘They went on further. Kopa ranged a little ahead, wanting little to do with the badskin, fearing he was being led into a trap or tempted from the ways of the true people by Ok-pa’s uphive lies. He got further and further ahead, until Ok-pa was out of sight behind him.

““Kopa!” Ok-pa warned. “Beware!”

‘Another tremor, bigger and more violent. Kopa was thrown from his feet into the dirt. The ceiling roared and jerked like a thing in pain, and with a tumultuous rush collapsed inward, spilling heaps of rock that fell into ash powder as they broke apart.

‘Coughing, Kopa got up to his feet. He waved the dust from his eyes but could see nothing through the shifting clouds. He soaked a rag with water from his canteen, and wrapped it about his face to save his lungs.

‘Gradually, the dust settled, revealing the cave in closing off the road.

‘Ok-pa was nowhere in sight.

“‘Ok-pa!’” he shouted. “‘Ok-pa!’” His voice was swallowed up by the hive. He felt it pressing down upon him like it wished to crush him, daring him to shout again and give it fair reason to wipe his story from the tale of his clan. “‘Ok-pa,’” he whispered. He was totally alone. The fall towered over him, filling up the tunnel completely. He heaved helplessly at a few of the rocks, but they broke apart, and let more ash slide down from above.

‘From the top of the slumped material there came a spill of debris, and a digging. A small hole opened. Fingers appeared and withdrew.

‘Kopa clambered up the fan of debris. He lay on the stone and the dust, forced to reposition himself as it shifted under him. Finally, he found good purchase, and peered into the hole. A narrow tunnel long as an arm led through to the other side. In the gap Ok-pa’s eye appeared, to be replaced by Ok-pa’s mouth.

“‘Kopa of the Five Eyes,’” he said. “‘I cannot come further. I must go back, and you must go on alone. You are close now. Soon you will reach the out-hive. I wish you luck.’”

“‘Ok-pa!’” Kopa cried. “‘I need your help!’”

“‘You will succeed, and return home,’” said Ok-pa. “‘I am a badskin, very wicked man. I know a survivor when I see one. Listen. You must do me a favour for my services to you.’”

“‘What?’” asked Kopa.

“‘When you see Emp-rah’s light, you must cry out that Snakes Running still lives, in me,’” said Ok-pa.

“‘But you do not believe!’”

‘Ok-pa’s lips smiled around his black teeth. “‘I do, and I do not. Do it for me so the story of my clan will not end yet.’”

“‘I shall,’” said Kopa.

“‘Good fortune. May the great hive spirits watch over you,’” Ok-pa said, and withdrew.

“‘How will I know the way?’” Kopa called.

‘Ok-pa had gone.

‘Kopa headed on. Not knowing any other way, he took passages that went up and away. The tunnels grew very dark, until there was no light of any kind, and he lit up his small lamp to guide the way. The sound of klaxons fell behind him, until he could hear them no more for the first time in his life. No matter how far

he had roamed in the underhive, the klaxons could be heard, wailing their wail, marking the time. Not there. Instead there was the creak and moan of angry spirits threatening to bring down the roof. Kopa was frightened, but took it as a good sign also, seeing in the noises the bad spirits' desire to keep him from his goal. He had to be close.

“I will not stop, bad spirits!” he said. “I will find Emp-rah's light, and call out my clan name, so our story will not end!”

‘He was tired, but went on until he was past the groaning place and its angry spirits. Darkness drowned him. With his little lamp he found a space, set up his camp, and fell asleep.

‘Jangling metal on wires woke him a fraction of an instant before a heavy, clawing body thumped onto his. Teeth snapped a handbreadth from his face, showering him in acrid spittle. He flailed with his arm, jamming it into the hot wetness of a mouth. He screamed as teeth slid into his flesh. Blood splattered his face. It hurt so much, but the teeth were kept from his face. Kopa had his knife in his other hand. The teeth opened, moved off his arm, and snapped at him again. He shoved for room, and thrust for survival.

‘The thing on him jerked back and forth twice, squealed, and fell dead with Kopa's knife in its heart. Kopa heaved it off himself and got shakily to his feet, knife hand pressed at his wounded arm. He hunted about for his lamp with his foot, kicking several times into the side of his assailant. Finally he found the lamp, and ignited it, though by the time he had it lit it was slick with his blood.

‘Curled in death lay a giant, furless rat. Warty growths covered its back. Its face was squashed and flat, the teeth sticking out at strange angles. A small head lay alongside the bigger, and though the main was dead, this lesser thing mewled pitifully, still alive. Kopa looked around in fear. The great rats run in packs, but this deformed example was too monstrous for its fellows to bear and was alone.

‘He lifted his hand from his injured arm. Red blood welled from the wound. He forced himself to look at it, probed the deep gash. He could move his fingers, though it pained him greatly to do so. He dressed the wound as quickly as he could lest the scent of blood draw worse things to his side, and though in terrible pain did not cry out. Then he turned his attention to the rat.

‘Corruption shot its body through, so he could not eat its flesh, but in its long, whipcord twin tails Kopa found a fine trophy. He cut them free, leaving them joined by a scrap of skin covered in wiry hairs. He wrapped them around his waist like a belt.

‘He flexed his arm and winced at the pain. For a moment he considered going

back. He looked down the rough tunnel. He had to go on for the sake of his clan, so he did.

‘Time passed unmeasured by the klaxon’s wail. His lamp burned low, and went out. The tunnel was too dark even for ratskin eyes, and so very quiet Kopa wondered if he might be dead and had passed into the Dark Cave without realising. His good hand trailed along the wall. The drip of blood from his wound was loud, his heart louder. His imagination filled the dark with horrors. Surely, he would die there.

‘A sound gathered in the dark. Low, breathy and sorrowful, a weeping wind that rose and fell and brought strange scents.

‘Light joined the wind. It came slowly, so slowly he did not realise he could see. He walked on into a grey space that felt even more like death than the black. But the shapes of mortal lands resolved themselves from the grey. The tunnel took form around him again, and he stepped back into the land of the living.

‘Ahead of him was a stout iron door, not Old Builder made, but the ugly trash of the uphivers. Around its ill-fitting edges the light glowed, and the wind breathed. There was no lock, only a handle. The door sagged, and dragged at the gritty floor. As he yanked at it, it dug in, turning over a curl of dirt, until, finally, it burst inwards and Kopa looked out into the world cave for the first and only time.

‘Wind angry at his trespass leapt at him, pushing him back. Light blinded him. He leant into both, his teeth gritted, and forced his way through the door against their objections.

‘It took a moment for his eyes to adjust. When they did, he dropped his gun at what he saw. Before him was the biggest space he would ever see. He stood upon a long cliff top, its compacted face made of broken things from times long gone. A rough stair wound downwards close by his position, skirting outcrops of dead metal on its way to the endless world cave floor. He turned, fearful of the floor, and so looked upon the home of his home. Giant cliffs went up forever. Gates and vents studded the sides, from which endless falls of ash, smoke and uphive rubbish poured.

‘He was outside the hive. He was looking at the thing that contained all the caves he had ever known. He had thought himself well travelled, but how few places he must have been, he realised now. There was space inside this one spire for a million cave domes, a billion, more than any ratskin could visit, more than any man could count.

‘He turned back to the long sweep of the world cave. The walls could not be

seen, but vanished into a haze a thousand miles away. All around the cave were more hives, dozens more, spikes like ferromites stabbing up, their heights lost behind racing vapours. How much smoke and dirt the uphivers must make to hide so high a ceiling!

‘Truly, the world cave was a filthy place. His heart sank. The wind stank of burned things. It scorched his nostrils. It thickened the spaces of his lungs. He coughed, and wet his breathing rag and pulled it over his nose, but even freshly moistened it could not stop the dirty air poisoning him. He could not tarry there. He must perform his duty, and go, or he would die.

‘He looked up at the ceiling. Its powerful glow made his eyes weep. But there was no single light, no glowing eye of Emp-rah to speak with.

“‘Where is it? What do I do?’” he whispered. “‘O Great Rat Mother, O Emp-rah, what do I do now?’”

‘The gods must have been listening, for their answer came swiftly.

‘He heard the yip of a warcy. A body cannoned into his wounded arm, and Kopa yelled in pain. He wrestled with a clutching hand, dodged a knife thrust that would have pierced him through the eye, bucked, punched his attacker in the face, and leapt back while his foe was reeling.

“‘Tu-or!’” he said.

‘Tu-or it was. The other brave stood facing him, knife ready for the kill.

“‘I thought I was the only one to make it here,’” he shouted over the screaming wind. “‘I should have been the only one!’”

‘Kopa drew out his own knife with his good hand. “‘We don’t have to fight!’” he said.

“‘There can only be one story singer,’” said Tu-or. “‘Only one can know what lies outside!’”

“‘Wait!’” shouted Kopa.

‘Tu-or charged at him, knife whistling.

‘They fought. Tu-or and Kopa were skilled fighters. Under other ceilings, they were a match. But Kopa was weak, and though Tu-or’s body was marked by his journey, he had no wound like Kopa’s. Kopa was going to die. Once that thought enters a man’s head in a fight, then he surely will.

‘Desperation sent Kopa’s knife slashing across Tu-or’s arm, spilling a sheet of crimson over ash-stained skin. Tu-or hissed, and pressed Kopa hard, forcing him back to the cliff edge.

“‘If I cannot stab you, you shall fall!’” Tu-or shouted.

‘The wind screamed louder, buffeting them, making their fight all the harder.

Tu-or pressed his advantage.

‘Perhaps it would have been Tu-or who would have returned, had Emp-rah Himself not taken a hand and decided who should bear the burden of the sacred task.

‘For a moment, the racing smokes of the cave world ceiling thinned. A pale disc appeared, growing brighter and brighter, until the smokes parted and violent light poured into the world cave.

‘Tu-or was facing directly into Emp-rah’s eye. While Kopa screwed up his eyes, in his surprise Tu-or looked up and the holy light hit him full in the face. He screamed at Emp-rah’s terrible brightness, then screamed again as Kopa’s knife punched through his chest, and into the hollow between the halves of his rib cage.

‘Tu-or slid off Kopa’s knife and dropped to hands and knees, mouth open and dribbling blood as quickly as his punctured chest. A second later, he was dead.

‘Kopa’s eyes burned with the light. Blindness drew its blanket over his sight as he turned into the glare. The pain was great, but he stared at Emp-rah’s eye defiantly to deliver his message as Tuk-mar had commanded.

“‘Hear me, O Emp-rah! I am Kopa, of Five Eyes Clan!’” He screamed into the howl of the wind. “‘I come to say Tuk-mar the story singer goes into the Dark Cave soon. Listen to me, Emp-rah, and hear my words. The story of Five Eyes Clan goes on, in the dark, under the roots of the great hive in the world cave of all things. We live. Our children grow. Our braves fight. We sing of your light, and we honour Mother Rat. Five Eyes Clan lives! Snakes Running Clan lives! We live!’”

‘The light dimmed and flared as clouds scudded over it, a sure sign Emp-rah had received his message, then more clouds came, hiding the eye, and tolerable dimness returned. Kopa staggered away, his vision swimming with bright spots that would never, ever leave him.’

Two Tails drew in a long, tired breath.

‘And that is what one of you, and one alone, must accomplish. How Kopa came back to Five Eyes Clan is another story, one that now will never be told. When Kopa whispered all that had happened to Tuk-mar, Tuk-mar nodded sagely and vouched it true. Shortly afterwards, Tuk-mar went into the Dark Cave, and Kopa took his place, and for many years he sang the stories of our people. By the time he came to sit here, Kopa’s eyesight was dying, scorched from him by Emp-rah’s holy light, but he did not mind, for the clan’s story continued.’ He drew in a

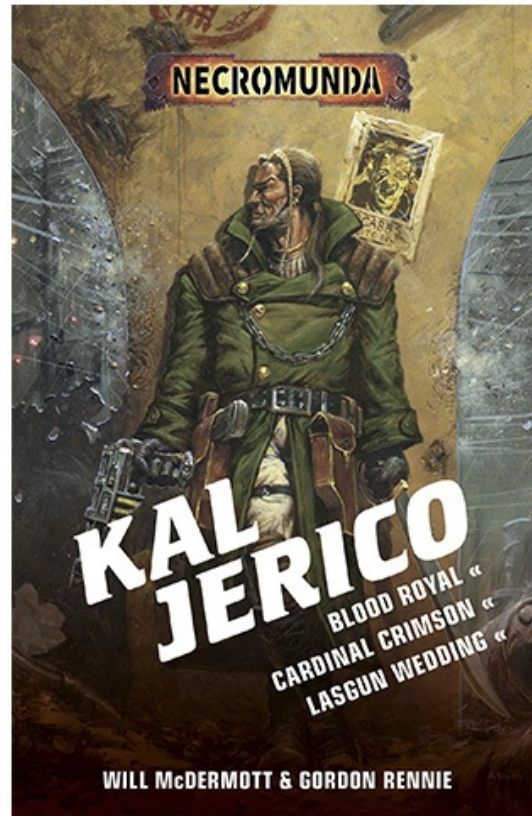
wheezing breath. ‘Now, you may ask how I know this so well.’ He reached behind himself, and pulled out the ancient trophy that gave him his name; a piece of leather bearing two tails. ‘I know this for these are the tails of the rat that attacked Kopa, there in the dark.’ He pointed at his face. ‘This is Kopa’s face that witnessed the awful might of the Emp-rah’s eye. These are Kopa’s eyes that lost their vision to the glare.’ He touched a scar on his arm. ‘This is the wound that dripped blood upon the faraway soil of the world cave cliffs. And here,’ he patted his chest, ‘is the heart that beat so quick as the clouds parted and great Emp-rah looked down upon Kopa.’ His voice thickened with coughs fighting up his throat to steal his voice with their barking. ‘I know these things,’ he gasped, ‘for I am Kopa, and this is my story.’

He coughed, many times. The girl offered more medicine to him, and when he was done he waved weakly at the braves. ‘Now I am tired,’ he said. ‘Leave me. Go forth. My time to go to the Dark Cave draws near. Seek you Emp-rah’s light and tell him we yet live, for all our sakes.’

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Guy Haley is the author of the Horus Heresy novel *Pharos*, the Primarchs novel *Perturabo: The Hammer of Olympia* and the Warhammer 40,000 novels *Dante*, *Baneblade*, *Shadowsword*, *Valedor* and *Death of Integrity*. He has also written *Throneworld* and *The Beheading* for The Beast Arises series. His enthusiasm for all things greenskin has also led him to pen the eponymous Warhammer novel *Skarsnik*, as well as the End Times novel *The Rise of the Horned Rat*. He has also written stories set in the Age of Sigmar, included in *War Storm*, *Ghal Maraz* and *Call of Archaon*. He lives in Yorkshire with his wife and son.

In the underhives of Necromunda, many bounty hunters ply their trade – but none are as successful or infamous as Kal Jerico. This edition collects together three novels in one action-packed omnibus taking you into the darkest depths of the Underhive.



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