



Bad Medicine

Jonathan Green

DR LUDVAN MARVO stood alone next to a seething chem pool, slow bubbles of gas emerging from the iridescent soup sloughing off their viscous skins of effluent film like ripperjack larvae shedding their birthing sacs. The methane emissions burned pink and green in the acid air. He clicked his heels nervously and cast anxious glances into the forest of scaffolding that grew from the detritus around the entrance to the forsaken cross-hive shuttle station.

Marvo was still dressed in his showman's attire: feathered top hat, crimson tails, mandlebrot-patterned spider-silk waistcoat, once white britches and genuine, knee-length ratskin jackboots. It paid to look good for the punters, people used to the muted, twilight colours of the Necromundan Underhive. It was amazing how a brightly coloured, gold-buttoned costume immediately won the respect of prospective customers. Of course Marvo wasn't his real name and nor was he a doctor of any description, but Dr Marvo was the name he went by: a stage name, as it were.

And he had no name for the pillar-tall, black ragged-robed stranger who emerged from the darkness of the derelict entrance in front of him, at least none that his master had ever deemed to tell him. For where no names are given, people will always create their own. And in the case of the looming, almost skeletal, figure towering over him now, the half-degenerate peoples of the deepest parts of the Underhive had created many. Deathbringer. Corpsemaker. Bonelord. Plagueking.

To the ratskins of the Broken Spar tribe the inhuman creature - for how could anything human smell like this? - was known as the Death Walker. To the scavvies of Carborundum Edge it was the Soul Taker. To the judges of Arbites Precinct Thirteen the name of the stranger was synonymous with a number of unsolved cases. Even the primitive scalies had a name for it in their grunting, almost incomprehensible tongue.

Marvo looked up into the cowed hood of the towering figure - who, to his agitated mind, seemed to stand at least two metres tall - and two, red-rimmed, cataract-shrouded eyes stared back at him. Despite appearing to be two sightless, milky orbs, the figures pupil-less gaze bored into Marvo like an

auger. He felt himself physically sag before the relentless, strangely piercing gaze...

And suddenly a feeling of calm overcame him - the calm of a man whose will is no longer his own. The figure spoke for the first time. Had he not been so entranced by the hypnotic cataract-stare Marvo might have thought that the voice reminded him of a broken fan-blade clicking in its cycling revolutions as it grated against a wire-meshed grille.

‘You have done well,’ the stranger said. ‘Girder Bridge, Yakapo’s Dome and Deliverance have all fallen to join the ranks of my loyal followers.’ If it hadn’t been for the stranger’s sinister hold over Marvo maybe the charlatan doctor would have noticed that the voice coming from the recesses of the cowl was little more than a death rattle. He might also have been aware of the horrible hissing coming from somewhere behind the looming presence of the black-robed figure. ‘When the time comes you will be well-rewarded for your obedience,’ the stranger went on, ‘but for now there is much still to be done.’

Scab-skinned talon-like hands emerged from the folds of the stranger’s ragged robe, holding a stoppered glass flask, which in turn contained a clear, purple liquid. The image of a circle trisected by further curving arcs could just be made out on the remains of a faded, peeling label stuck to its side. The stranger placed the container and its innocuous-seeming contents into Marvo’s open palms, cold fingers closing the doctor’s hand around the glass.

For the first time since the black-cowled figure had spoken Marvo broke eye contact and looked down at the flask he now held in his hands. ‘Just what the doctor ordered,’ he said.

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NATHAN CREED took a long, languid drag on the cheroot held between his finger and thumb, and eased himself back into the pillow, running the fingers of his other hand through his close-cropped grey hair. Lying on the bed in a sleeveless undershirt and his trousers, he closed his eyes and exhaled with a satisfied groan, finishing it off with a smoke ring. He breathed in deeply again, tensing every muscle in his body as he did so, until his scalp tingled. The room smelled of tobacco smoke, musty bed sheets, stale sweat, and cheap perfume - and he loved it.

Creed opened his eyes. At the foot of the bed his lady-friend, Maisy-Lou, was reattaching a fishnet stocking to her suspender belt. He followed the line of the girl’s perfectly proportioned calf up to the smooth olive skin of her thigh and her pert, round backside. He took in the frilly undergarments, the petrol

blue basque, her jutting bosom, the alluring cleavage, the swan-like curve of her neck, the cascade of purple hair with the plaits of violet and black, the delicate set of her features, her rosebud lips, the heavily-mascaraed lashes framing her endearing, warm brown eyes.

‘Maisy,’ he drawled, ‘you’re the best, baby. You’re the best.’

‘So when are you going to make an honest woman of me then, Creed?’ she said, zipping herself into a tight, and extremely short, black skirt.

‘What and take you away from all this?’ Creed laughed, taking in the peeling paper, cracked ceiling plaster, bare floorboards and naked light bulb, of the upstairs room where Maisy-Lou entertained her gentlemen visitors, with a sweep of his hand.

Seated at the dressing table, the Ace of Hearts, favourite man-killer eased on a pair of thigh-length rat-fur boots with heels like stiletto daggers. ‘In that case, you can get the hell out of here, you bastard,’ she said calmly, pulling the bootlaces tight.

‘Aw don’t be like that, Maisy-Lou. You know you’re the only girl for me.’

The saloon-girl stood up and threw a black feather boa around her neck. ‘We can’t all afford to spend our days lying around in bed.’ Her outfit was completed by a top hat covered in dark green crushed velvet. ‘Some of us have got work to do.’

Suddenly there were shouts outside and the whomph of a plasma weapon discharging. Someone screamed. The rattle of auto-fire followed. Another plasma discharge. More cries and shouting.

‘What the skav was that?’ the bounty hunter cursed, startled. A concussive boom, like a fuel tank exploding, rocked the street outside and rattled the windowpanes of the room. Creed was on his feet in seconds. He threw up the grubby window and stuck his head out.

Despite its comparatively large size for an Underhive settlement, Tunnel Town really consisted of just one street that ran between the buildings lining the sides of a vast conduit that was semi-circular in cross-section. To the west the tunnel opened into the spoil hills and ash dunes of crumbling hab-domes. Guild trade routes wound their way through the wastes to the settlements of Ferro’s Gulch and Downer’s Deep, and further still on to Steel Canyon. To the east the tunnel branched, roads leading uphive, to the north, and on to the legendary cross-hive highway - and scavvy territory - of Thunder Road to the south.

Creed took in the scene at a glance. At the point where the tunnel branched stood the corrugated iron and ceramite facade of Hackbut’s Arms House. The burning wreckage of a motorbike - it looked like Wendrell Prayne’s - lay in the

middle of a scorched blast circle in front of the armourer's. The street between Hackbut's and the Ace of Hearts was littered with the bodies of at least half a dozen townsfolk. A sobbing woman was huddled on a veranda.

Almost directly below Creed the bushy-bearded and pony-tailed Wendrell Prayne was hunkered down behind a water butt outside the saloon. On the other side of the street another bounty hunter, Kaspar Van Greel, had taken cover behind a crate on which the ratskin was resting the barrel of his sniper rifle. Both of them had been enjoying the hospitality of the saloon downstairs only moments before.

Their target was in the open, striding down the street from Creed's right: a mad-eyed half-breed wielding a plasma pistol. The man was in a frenzy. Creed watched as the lunatic let off a series of energised blasts. Firing haphazardly windows blew out, shop signs melted and water pipes ruptured...

Prayne opened fire with his sawn-off, pump-action shotgun. Sprays of red mist showed where the solid shot rounds had hit the lunatic but the man barely faltered. Two lucky shots fired in rapid succession from the plasma pistol seared towards Van Greel, the first obliterating his cover, the second puncturing the Ratskin's neck. Prayne was fumbling to reload. With his weapon on its low energy setting, the murderous gunman was not so inconvenienced. An energised shell struck Prayne's arm and spun the man round, precious cartridges flying from his fingers.

All this had occurred in only a matter of seconds. Creed turned away, looking at Maisy-Lou grimly.

'Sorry, darling, gotta go!' Creed apologised, pulling on his long leather coat and grabbing his gun-belt from the back of the chair, and burst out of the room.

He took the stairs three at a time, buckling the gun-belt around his waist as he did so. The bar below was empty apart from a few of Maisy's fellow saloon-girls who were crowded in an anxious, scantily-clad huddle at a window. Madam L'Amour's hired help behind the bar wasn't going to win any awards for bravery either, cowering behind the solid plasteel unit.

Reaching the saloon's swing doors Creed slowed, in one fluid motion drawing his two stub guns and spinning the chambers open. Both were fully loaded with dum-dum rounds. A deft flick of the wrist closed them again. Outside the scream of random plasma fire and maniacal yelling continued. With a grin to Madam L'Amour's whimpering protegees and a husky, 'Ladies', Creed stepped into the street.

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BLOOD RAN from a number of wounds on the lunatic's body, testimony to the accuracy of the bounty hunters' shots. But still he came on. Saying nothing Creed depressed the two triggers.

Four bullets spiralled through the air, covering the twenty metres between the gunslinger and the gunman in a split second. The first entered the gunman's body through his gut, tearing out the other side taking most of a kidney with it. The second hit his thigh, severing an artery and fracturing the femur. The third shattered a kneecap while the fourth impacted against his ribcage.

The man stumbled, his mad-eyes fixing on Creed. Three more shots followed, disarming the man, tearing open a shoulder and hitting his chest. The gunman slumped into the dirt, face first.

Creed strode forward, both guns trained on the lunatic. Wendrell Prayne got to his feet, following behind.

'Nice shooting, Creed,' he said as they both stood over the man's body. 'Bastard just didn't know when he was dead!'

With a snarl like a ravening beast the gunman jerked into life. Twisting his neck round he sank his teeth into Prayne's leg. As the big man cried out in startled pain, Creed calmly put a bullet between the lunatic's eyes.

'You were saying?'

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IN THE AFTERMATH of the bloodbath, townsfolk had gathered at the scene like carrion bats round a scavvy kill. As is always the way after unprovoked acts of violence the shocked populace of Tunnel Town wanted to know why the gunman had gone on the rampage.

Snippets of information slowly began to emerge from the morass of gossip, rumour and counter-rumour. After some discussion by the various notaries and town worthies a fairly reliable picture was built up of the man and his movements over the last few weeks.

His name was Plaz Tyburn. He was a half-ratskin drifter and had done a stint bringing in the stinger mould harvest out at Ferro's Gulch. There was evidence of this on his blistered hands where a minor fungal disease known as red-rot, not uncommon among mould farmers, had taken hold.

Creed was at the heart of all these discussions and as the one who had brought Tyburn's rampage to an end the Tunnel Towners turned to him to follow the matter to its resolution - whatever that might be.

It soon became apparent to the bounty hunter that Tyburn's killing spree hadn't started in Tunnel Town either. Following the trail of carnage out into the

spoil hills to the west - a thoughtlessly gunned down body here, a smouldering shack there - Creed finally came to the solitary tarpaulin tepee, pitched in the lee of a slag heap, the unfurled tent door flapping in the breeze of ancient air-recyclers.

Cautiously Creed flicked the tarpaulin back with a primed stub gun. The tent was free of occupants. The bounty hunter holstered his guns. There was the drifter's bedroll, the billycan containing the residue of his last meal and a battered rucksack, no doubt containing Tyburn's few personal possessions. Creed nudged the bag open with a booted foot.

A glass bottle rolled out of the bag and rattled onto the floor of the tent. Dregs of a purple liquid sloshed inside it. With a gloved hand Creed picked it up.

A crudely printed label was pasted to the side of the bottle. On it, in lurid magenta ink and an overly-elaborate typeface were the words, 'Dr Marvo's Patent Panacea' and beneath the legend, in smaller print, 'For the Relief of all Aches, Pains, Maladies and Agues. To be taken as required.'

A cure-all, eh? Creed thought to himself. And looks to me like there's enough left for one more dose.

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'WELL IT'S QUITE a concoction, I can tell you,' Doc Haze said, looking up from the hazy view-plate. The streams of green-lit runes scrolling up the screen reflected from the doc's glasses and the half-metallic dome of his head, giving him the appearance of some kind of datum-drone. 'You didn't get this from any Guilder trading post, I'll wager.'

'Go on,' the bounty hunter encouraged. The Underhive surgeon-cum-scientist had been reluctant to help at first but once Creed had reminded him that he owed him after the Ignus Mander incident and suggested the doc might like to talk it through with Creed's two associates, Isaiah Haze had changed his tune.

'Of course most of it's water, 78% to be precise, but the "body" of the elixir is made up of all sorts of stuff. The bulk of it's crude algal-based stimulants - nothing so refined as Spur or Slaughter. But get this, there's evidence of the neurone plague virus in there too. Not a lot, it's been heavily diluted, but even a trace like this would be enough to trigger full neural breakdown within weeks, and with regular intake of the stuff maybe only days.'

'Zombie plague?' Creed exclaimed.

'The one and only.'

Creed had encountered victims of the brain-rotting disease before, in the abandoned tunnels under Toxic Sump. 'You're sure?' he asked.

'No doubt about it,' the scientist said, wiping his hands on the front of his grimy lab coat. 'And if you needed any more proof, your friend over there was suffering from the early stages,' he said, nodding over his shoulder at the dissected corpse lying on the gurney on the other side of the gleaming lab.

'Guess that explains why he went on the rampage.'

'The Tunnel Towners asked me to perform an autopsy just to be sure, but then of course they're paying... Definite lesions in the frontal lobes. It's obvious in spite of the mess your bullet made.' Haze glowered at the bounty hunter. 'Where was it this poor bastard had come from?'

'Ferro's Gulch.'

'Dr Marvo's Patent Panacea,' Haze said, picking up the bottle in a bloodied rubber-gloved hand. 'Never heard of him. I reckon if you want to find out any more about the source of this little problem Ferro's Gulch is the place to go.'

'That's what I was thinking, and you're coming with me,' Creed grinned, evilly.

'I am?'

'You owe me two, remember. You wouldn't want a certain Antrobus Vetch finding out about your double-dealings now would you, doc?'

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CREED STOPPED in front of the bridge and looked across the ravine at the settlement of Ferro's Gulch. The low buildings, tractor barns and mould vat sheds were clustered together at the edge of the precipice. Beyond was prime ground for growing stinger mould. Here the organic sewage of millions of hivers dwelling in the mountain-city kilometres above overflowed from an acre of waste processing plants in the noxious holestead of Fester Hole, only a dome's height above, and washed over the uranium fields in a monthly inundation. In the heat generated by the resulting exothermic reaction the stinger mould thrived. An oasis in the no-man's-land of the wastezones.

Behind the bounty hunter, Doc Haze had also come to a halt, puffing after the brisk walk from Tunnel Town. His hulking servitor One-Eight-Seven was next to him, its generator idling. The slave-machine watched Creed impassively with one human eye and one, cracked red-lensed camera. Its monstrous mechanical left arm twitched from its shoulder mount.

'No sign of life,' Creed drawled. 'You'd think there'd be someone around.'

'I don't like it,' Haze stated, rubbing his hands together nervously.

‘You owe me, remember?’ Creed reminded him, a hand moving towards a holstered stub gun.

‘But after this our debt’s clear, right?’

‘Have it your way, doc,’ the bounty hunter replied, taking the cheroot from his mouth and flicking it at the ground. As he crushed the butt under his boot he saw the muddied piece of parchment trapped in the churned-up ruts created by the treads of some large transport. Creed pulled it free of the dirt.

In gaudy pinks, greens and yellows overly-fussy titles, similar to those on the label of the recovered panacea bottle, proclaimed to those who could read, ‘Dr Marvo’s Marvellous Medicine Show’ and for those who couldn’t the image of an enthusiastically smiling, top-hatted, white-bearded bespectacled character held out a stoppered medicine bottle while in the background bent old men danced jigs, their crutches discarded, and a beaming woman had one eye open and one closed.

The lame walk and the blind see, Creed considered. I think I should meet this miracle worker.

‘You ever been to a marvellous medicine show, doc?’ Creed asked, grinning like a dune shark.

‘Er, no,’ Haze replied uncertainly, ‘although I did catch a freak show down in Perdition once. Men with eyes on stalks, a woman with pincers instead of hands, a thing with more tentacles than a sludge jelly orgy... Scavvies and mutants the lot of them. The Redemptionists thought all their Ascensions of the Emperor had come at once when they caught up with them outside Ratbone Gorge.’

Creed was already halfway across the bridge. ‘Come on, doc, and bring your walking screwdriver with you.’

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CREED’S FIRST suspicions had been right: Ferro’s Gulch was deserted. Balls of tumbleweed bundled along the main street in the fan-wind. Glowglobes flickered fitfully on the concave surface of the dome roof far above. The sign outside the Slygo’s Saloon creaked on rusted hinges like a worn-out augmetic. Opposite the drinking-hole a motorbike stood abandoned. However, there were also signs of a battle as clear to the gunslinger as the effluent stench wafting in from the mould fields.

But if there’s been some trouble here, Creed pondered piecing the clues together, where are the bodies?

‘If you were new in town,’ the bounty hunter said, turning to his reluctant

companion and taking in the main street with an expansive gesture, 'where would you go to meet the locals, doc?'

'Is this a trick question?' Doc Haze said, scratching at the inflamed skin where his scalp joined his metal skull-plate. Creed grinned at him, making the doc feel even more uncomfortable. 'The drinking hole, of course.'

'So we're in agreement once again. Great minds think alike eh?'

'And fools rarely differ,' Haze muttered under his breath as the bounty hunter strode towards the doors of Slygo's.

'Word to the wise, doc. Let's stick together,' Creed suggested grimly as he approached the saloon's swing doors, unholstering his stubbers, and added, 'Ready, girls?'

The interior of the bar was under a shadowy twilight. Rather than wait for his eyes to adjust to the gloom Creed simply flicked his photo-visor down from inside the brim of his hat. The scene was instantly picked out in lurid shades of green.

Tables and chairs lay overturned as after a bar-room brawl, broken glass crunching under his boots as he advanced into the otherwise silent saloon. Only it wasn't silent. There was an unsettling chomping sound and a slurping noise like something sucking the marrow from bones.

Creed scanned the bar, seeing everything in graduating shades from almost black through emerald and jade to brilliant viridian. Bodies littered the room, facedown on the floor, lying at unnatural angles over the few still-standing tables, bent backwards over the bar and upturned chairs, slumped against the balustrade of the broad staircase. The whole place smelt of death. And there were things moving in the darkness.

Creed heard the clump of iron feet behind him indicating that Doc Haze and the servitor had entered the building. Something else had heard it too.

A sibilant hiss passed around the room as the plague zombies raised their heads and turned their jaundiced gaze at the intruders.

'By the Spire!' Haze gasped behind him.

The half-dead things abandoned the corpses they had been feasting on and, at the prospect of fresh meat, advanced on the trio.

'I hope you're prepared, doc, because now the killing begins.'

The muzzles of Creed's guns exploded in the darkness and a partially decomposed creature was hurled backwards by the impact of a dum-dum round. But that was only one. Dozens of shambling figures were loping towards, jaws snapping reflexively, ruined throats issuing forth bestial growls.

A half-dead thing, still wearing the torn remnants of a flouncy gown, lurched at Creed. Clumps of tangled blonde hair hung from its parchment-thin

scalp and a smudge of lipstick was smeared across its pockmarked lips, which had drawn back from the rictus grin of its fleshless gums. The stub gun kicking in his palm, the bounty hunter put two bullets into the walking corpse, turning its head into an expanding mist of bone, blood and rotted brain tissue.

Beams of searing blue-white light cut through the advancing mass of zombies from behind Creed. Glancing round he saw Doc Haze aiming haphazardly into the pack with a battered laspistol. Close by the unknowingly altruistic cyborg snapped the neck of a zombie gripped in its vice-claw, crushing the spine of another under a metal hoof.

The bounty hunter quickly assessed the distance between his party and the doors that led to freedom. Ten metres at most but the space between was filled with yet more of the degenerated townsfolk.

On they came, broken teeth snapping relentlessly. Creed knew what could happen if those teeth sank into his flesh... Swinging the stubber in his left hand sideways he found the jaws of a mouldering harridan, gangrenous green blubber sagging horribly on a body gone to fat before becoming infected by the degenerating neurone plague. The brain-dead woman's teeth clamped around the muzzle of the weapon and splintered.

'Eat this!' Creed spat and blew out of the back of her skull.

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CREED BUNDLED out of the through the saloon doors, bowling into the fleeing Haze. Using his tumbling momentum, Creed rolled onto his feet and bounded into a run, agile as a ratskin brave.

The bike stood propped up on its stand on the other side of the street. He leapt into the saddle and thumbed the ignition rune. The bike's engine roared into life, growling like a branded synth-ox.

'Get on!' Creed yelled over the deep-throated petrochemical bellow of the beast. The doc didn't need telling twice.

Zombies burst into the street, moaning horribly. There was a crash of splintering wood and One-Eight-Seven barged through the timber wall of the bar, half a revenant saloon-girl clinging to its pistoning legs, a slime-oozing spinal column still locked in its claw.

'Now let's get the hell out of here!' Creed shouted over the bike's diesel-guzzling roar.

The back wheel of the bike spinning wildly, the stink of scorched rubber overwhelming the stench of death in his nostrils, Creed slewed the vehicle round, throwing up a spray of gravel behind them. Then, with an over-revving

scream the bike hurtled forwards, bombing along the main street, away from Slygo's Saloon, towards the bridge out of Ferro's Gulch. Creed was leant forwards over the handlebars, Doc Haze clinging on for dear life, One-Eight-Seven pounding after them on its augmented leg-chassis.

In no time they were crossing the bridge, already doing a breakneck speed, the plasteel sections clattering under the speeding bike's wheels. As soon as they were on the other side, Creed pulled on the brakes. The vehicle skidded to a halt in a cloud of dust.

The bounty hunter pulled two grenades from the recesses of his coat, yanked their pins free with his thumbs and rolled them across the chasm-spanning construction. Two more followed.

'Good thing I picked up a little extra at Hackbut's,' Creed said, thinking aloud. 'Even if he does charge like an overloading fuel cell.'

'What?' the doc queried, intruding on Creed's musings.

'Highly,' he replied.

The bridge joists juddered, this time under the heavy, piledriver footfalls of the chugging servitor. The grenades bounced as they rolled, one dropping between the girders. At the end of the main street the growing zombie pack continued after them. One-Eight-Seven reached the safety of the far side of the chasm.

The grenades detonated in a series of eardrum-battering bangs, accompanied by a blinding pyrotechnics display. The midsection of the bridge fell away immediately, dropping into the murky abyss below. With a groan of dying metal the rest of the structure buckled and twisted, cantilevering until, with a resounding clang that echoed from the dome roof high above the bulk of the bridge hit the wall of the chasm. The rogue grenade had exploded in a crevice, blowing the rusted stanchions free of the solid face of the ravine.

'That's them taken care of for now,' Creed said, wiping his sweat-beaded brow with the back of a hand, 'but this ain't over yet.'

'So what now?' Haze asked, happy to let the bounty hunter continue to take the initiative, having not wanted to be involved from the start.

'You get back to Tunnel Town, get in touch with your Arbites contacts - and don't look like that, after the last couple of favours I've done for you I know you've got them! Get in touch with your contact and inform what pass for authorities down here about the outbreak in Ferro's Gulch. I'm going to follow our only other lead. I'm going after this Dr Marvo.'

And how are you going to do that?' Haze asked, rubbing his hands together in agitation.

'By following those,' Creed said, pointing at the jagged ruts of transport

tracks that had churned up the surface of the road leading into and out of the townstead. 'Now, off the bike.'

'You mean I've got to walk?'

'Get your pet monkey-wrench to carry you if you want but I'm out of here before this happens anywhere else,' he stated firmly, jerking a thumb at the baying pack of rotting townsfolk trapped on the other side of the ravine.

Doc Haze dismounted. 'Tell me, Creed, why are you doing this?'

Revving the huge bike's engine, the bounty hunter turned to face the doc. 'Always was a sucker for hard-luck cases,' he pronounced loudly over the growl of the machine. Unbidden an image of Maisy-Lou's pouting face swam into his head. And with that he sped off after the mysterious Dr Marvo.

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OUTSIDE THE mining settlement of Downer's Deep, Dr Marvo's Marvellous Medicine Show was in full swing. 'And now, ladies and gentlemen, what you've all been waiting for,' the top-hatted, tinted-spectacled ringmaster-like Dr Marvo announced, displaying via exaggerated gestures that he had nothing in his hands or up his sleeves. 'Brewed from hive-fungi and distilled blindsnake venom, according to a secret recipe passed down by my dear old ratskin grandmother. Allowed to ferment in an actinide still of my own design,' the charlatan's voice was building to a crescendo as he reached the climax of his sales pitch. 'Bathed in the light of phosphor vents for a full cycle and brought to you today as Dr Marvo's Patent Panacea!'

With a dextrous flourish that proved that the hand is indeed faster than the eye, Dr Marvo extracted a corked bottle from out of thin air. The crowd gathered before the gaudily painted wagon with its fold-down makeshift stage gasped, awestruck. Simple sleight of hand, that's all it was, but it got them every time, the gullible fools. As Dr Marvo liked to say, although never within earshot of a paying customer, there were only three certainties in life in the Underhive: death, the Guild and the fact that Underhivers were gullible idiots, ready to part with their hard-earned credits at the drop of the good doctor's hat - or rather for a drop of the good doctor's 'cure-all'.

Marvo looked out over the crowd of expectant, slack-jawed faces, as a giant spider might inspect the hive-vermin caught in its web.

There was a moment's palpable silence. Then a cracked voice piped up from somewhere at the back of the throng: 'Looks like 'shine to me, sonny!'

'Hiveshine, sir? What, not even Second Best?' A few of the miners laughed at the jibe. Marvo fixed his gaze on the toothless, rat-whiskered little old-timer.

He was supporting himself on a pair of crutches.

‘Well I wouldn’t waste my money on it,’ the old man retorted. ‘Been a cripple since that day in Number Six shaft seven years ago. No fancy doctoring’s ever put it right neither,’ he went on. ‘Only thing that would, would be a new pair of them cy-borg legs from Zircon’s mech-shop and I ain’t never gonna be able to afford them, now I can’t work what with being a cripple an’ all.’

‘Come forward, sir.’ Marvo beckoned to the old man, with the encouraging smile of a ripperjack. ‘That’s quite some story, sir, and I’d like to do you a favour.’

The old-timer hobbled towards the stage, the crowd parting to let him through. ‘What’s that then?’

‘Would you try some of my ‘shine?’

‘Go on then. I never likes to turn down a free drink.’ Propping the crutches under his arms the old man took the bottle and, with his back to Marvo’s audience, took a swig.

‘How’s it taste?’ Dr Marvo asked, a look of wide-eyed excitement on his face.

‘Disgusting!’ came the vehement reply.

‘But of course it tastes disgusting,’ laughed Marvo, sticking out his tongue and pulling a face, ‘because that’s how you know it’s doing you good! But how do you feel?’

There was a pause for dramatic tension during which time you could have cut the atmosphere with a chainsword.

‘Fantastic!’ shouted the cripple. ‘I feel fantastic!’ With that he dropped his crutches and began hopping up and down on the spot. ‘Why I’ll wager Lord Helmawr himself doesn’t feel better right this second!’ The old-timer grabbed Marvo’s hand and shook it vigorously. ‘Thank you, son. Thank you kindly. I’ll take a bottle!’

‘What’s your name, sir?’ Marvo asked the skipping guinea pig.

‘Abrams, Ichabod Abrams!’

‘Well, Mr Abrams, it’s on the house!’ Out of the corner of his eye Marvo could see the credulous miners digging deep for their credits. ‘All righty folks, who’s going to be the first to buy a bottle?’

A shot rang out across plaza. The crowd turned as one. Standing behind the mass of people was a tall, leather-coated figure, only the stubble on his chin visible under the shadow of his wide-brimmed hat. In one gloved hand he held a wide-muzzled stub gun and in the other an empty glass bottle.

‘You people,’ the stranger shouted to Marvo’s potential customers, ‘get

outta here!’

Nobody moved.

‘Didn’t you hear me?’ the gunslinger shouted. ‘Well maybe you’ll hear this!’

He fired off a succession of shots. Screaming and yelling in confusion, the crowd fled. In a few moments the only ones remaining were Marvo, the plant and half a dozen ugly, overweight hired scum.

‘I know what you’re up to, Marvo!’ the gunslinger called across the square. ‘Thing is, I’m asking myself, who’d be sick enough to start spreading a neurone plague?’

‘And you’re not going to find out!’ Marvo yelled back angrily. ‘Well? What are you waiting for?’ the showman screeched at his henchmen. ‘Take him out!’

* * *

THIS REALLY ISN’T fair, Creed thought as he picked his targets, almost leisurely, there’s six of them and only one of me. They really haven’t got a hope, the poor sons-of-sumpsuckers!

Not only were the sort of scum Marvo could afford to hire overweight and out of shape but in his time as a bounty hunter in the Underhive Creed had taken on plague zombies, an alien ork, a pyromaniac wyrd and a whole gang of scavvies single-handedly - and won!

‘Okay, ladies,’ Creed called to the charging, gun-waving scum, ‘shall we dance?’

* * *

‘GET UP THERE and drive!’ Marvo screamed at the now miraculously cured old-timer. Spluttering, Abrams clambered into the cab of the transport while Marvo hastily pulled up the fold-down stage, locking the side of the transport in place. Bullets spanged off the reinforced plasteel hull, chipping the paint that spelt out the legend ‘Dr Marvo’s Marvellous Medicine Show’. As the engine roared into life, Marvo leapt into the caravan-cum-sales booth through the open back.

‘What did he mean, neurone plague?’ Abrams called back, over his shoulder, from the driver’s cab.

‘What?’ Marvo blustered.

‘I’ve nothing against conning a few dumb dirt-diggers out of their creds but I ain’t having anything to do with no neurone plague!’

‘Not now, you old fool! Just get us out of here!’ Marvo screamed as a gurgling cry signalled that at least one of the hired scum was dead. ‘Or do you actually want to taste some of the merchandise just for once?’

Oily-black smoke belching from its exhaust stack, the rig lurched forward. Marvo stumbled sideways as he tried to keep his balance and bumped into a drum lashed into the back of the transport. Inspiration hit with the first bump in the road. Tugging the rope free of the barrel, a hefty kick then jettisoned it from the back of the moving vehicle.

The full fuel-drum crashed onto the road, its lid spinning free and its contents splashing onto the cracked rockrete of the plaza. Clinging to a roll-bar Marvo watched the fuel wash around the feet of the betrayed scum and spread across the square towards the interfering stranger. A struck match would be all it would take...

* * *

CREED SAW THE danger before the slow-witted scum, the three that were left anyway. The rapidly expanding oil slick erupted in a burst of orange and vermilion flames two metres high. Creed sprinted for the bike he had left idling at the edge of the square, the burning rabble screaming as the fire engulfed them.

Gunning the throttle, Creed drove the bike free of the fire-slick. Steering it round the rubble-strewn edge of the plaza he took off after Marvo’s rig. Marvo had a head start on the bounty hunter but on a bike, over rough ground, Creed reckoned he had the advantage. Sure enough, only two clicks out of Downer’s Deep he caught up with the gas-guzzling caravan.

Don’t rate my girls’ chances against that monster, he thought, the wind whipping his coat tails out behind him and threatening to remove his hat. Besides, it takes all my strength to control this thing with both hands on the column. Only one way to do this and that’s up close.

Accelerating, Creed pulled level with the jerking rig as it bounced back through the hills towards Ferro’s Gulch. Before the driver realised what he was doing, still gripping the handlebars tightly Creed sprang up onto the bike’s padded seat.

Here goes nothing!

With an almighty leap Creed propelled himself upwards. He hit the side of the rocking transport and grabbed onto the edge of the roof. The bike swerved into a bank of compacted ash, crashing onto its side and the engine cutting out.

After a moment’s desperate scrambling he pulled himself onto the roof and

lay there, spread-eagled, attempting to recover his breath.

The ghost town of Ferro's Gulch loomed grey in the distance. In front of it, the deep black scar of the gulch itself opened like a wound in the compacted ash and spoil.

As Creed lay there he could hear the angry Marvo cursing as he stumbled about inside the back of the rig. Guns aren't going to be much good in this situation, Creed considered. He slipped his bootknife from its sheath against his calf and clenched it tightly between his teeth. With both hands free he grabbed the roll-bar at the back of roof and, somersaulting forwards, swung himself into the back of the transport.

He landed squarely in the back of the wagon. The charlatan doctor stood behind the driver's cab surrounded by the periphery of his life and trade. In one hand he held a glass flask containing a clear, fizzing, purple liquid. In the other was a large syringe, which he was filling from the flask.

'This is the neat stuff,' Marvo chuckled, a manic gleam in his eye. 'Symptoms like these need special treatment.' The insane doctor lunged, the syringe clasped in his hand like a dagger, as if he intended to stab it through Creed's heart. The ravine loomed larger through the front of the cab.

Then the knife was in his hand. Creed pulled back his arm. As he flung the knife, the transport bumped as a wheel went over a particularly large obstacle. The blade sailed past Marvo's ear before hitting the back of the driver's neck. Marvo's plant slumped lifelessly over the steering wheel. The momentum of the jolt sent Marvo stumbling into the unsteady bounty hunter. Wrong-footed Creed toppled backwards. Then, for a brief moment, there was air beneath them and the two men fell out of the back of the wagon into the dust and dirt of the road. With a squeal of tyres on twisted metal the rumbling rig hit the edge of the demolished bridge and went over the edge of the ravine.

Creed rolled in the dirt, the shrill scream of the transport's engine ringing in his ears until it was killed by a grating, axle-shearing crash which in turn was followed by a seismic detonation, as the rig hit the floor of the chasm. An expanding cloud of black smoke and roiling crimson flames rose above the rift.

In an instant the bounty hunter was on his feet, both stub guns in his hands and trained on the sprawled, facedown form of Dr Marvo. 'Up you get, you crazy son-of-a-bitch, nice and slow.'

Marvo flinched. Creed tightened his trigger fingers then stopped. He could hear an almost imperceptible fizzing sound. Marvo's body spasmed again. Stepping forwards cautiously Creed gave the doctor's body a sharp kick, flipping the charlatan onto his back. The bounty hunter gave an involuntary gasp and took a sudden step back.

Dr Marvo's face had begun to dissolve. His nose had melted into the nasal cavity as if eaten away by acid while his teeth rattled loosely in gums turned to bloody pulp. The man's eyes bulged, crying tears of bubbling fluid that in turn ate into his drawn cheeks. Then Creed realised that the same process was affecting the rest of the man's body. It was as if it was being eaten away by acid from the inside.

Sticking out of Marvo's waistcoat was the syringe, the hypodermic needle sunk deep into his chest, the plunger fully depressed. Marvo had landed on his own weapon. It didn't need Doc Haze to work out that such a large dose of undiluted neurone plague injected directly into his bloodstream was more than Marvo's body could cope with. The result: total cellular collapse.

'How's that for a taste of your own medicine?' Creed muttered as he holstered his stubbers and turned away. Scum like Marvo's always have a bounty on their heads, the bounty hunter decided, and I'm the man to collect.

He didn't have far to walk to recover the bike. At last he managed to right it. Creed remounted, punched the ignition rune and, the engine purring like a contented feline, headed back towards Downer's Deep.

I could get used to this, he said to himself as he rode off into the silver-white lithium haze of globe-set.

* * *

A DARK-ROBED figure, tall and thin and motionless as a stalagmite, watched the gunslinger leave. Behind it a group of hissing half-decomposing things sensed their master's cold fury - despite being brainless beasts - and slunk back, deeper into the shadows of the conduit runnel. They snarled uneasily, instinctively reacting to their master's abyss-black mood.

'I know, my pets, I know,' came a voice from within the fold of the figure's cowl like talons scraping on slate. 'I predict there will be a reckoning between us and the downhive desperado. In time.'

And then the tomb-dark figure was gone on the fan-winds, back into the shadows. Back to the deadzones. Back to the darkest places of the Underhive to continue his work. And to wait.