



BOYZ IN THE HIVE

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IT WAS COLD and desolate out here in the millennia old post-industrial wasteland, beyond the furthest human settlement. Concrete and steel ruins of buildings stood all around but not a single one was wholly intact. The ground here was of a cracked and grey soil, almost nutrient-free and deposited hundreds of centuries ago by ancient industrial processes now only half-understood by the factory workers and their tech-adept overseers. The distant thrum of the factories drifted down from above, just audible over the fan-winds that swept through this part of the Underhive, bringing with them the acrid stink of petrochemical pollution. All that lived out here were ripperjacks, the ever-pernicious wireweed and the occasional sump-spawned monstrosity. But then that was why they called such places the Badzones.

A man stood at the foot of a slag heap looking at the broken and discarded cargo container resting at an angle on the summit. Half of the dome of the man's head was made up of a shiny metal plate, connected to the skin covering the rest of his skull by tarnished rivets. Below the level of the half-balding, half-metallic pate long, straggly white hair hung down to the man's shoulders. He was dressed in something that might once have resembled a long, white lab coat, although now the garment was covered with the greasy smears of machine oil and the rust-brown stains of dried blood. The coat was buttoned tightly to the neck to help keep out the chill, biting wind. He was a scientist, a surgeon and, like all who lived as long as he had in the urban dereliction of the Underhive, a survivor.

It was hard to tell how old he was but judging by facial appearance alone he had the semblance of a man in his forties. Bionic implants had a habit of preserving the organic parts of a body, granting the owner some measure of longevity, as long as they didn't die of unnatural causes first. But in the lawless Badzones of the Underhive, death by gunshot wounds or an early demise at the hands of a cannibal scavvy gang seemed almost more natural than heart failure and old age.

A gust of wind blew the scientist's lank hair into his face. It was at moments like these that the man felt reassured. It reminded him that whatever else

seemed to happen in the shadows of the Underhive ancient systems continued to perform their regular cycles, recycling channelling air and water - the most basic essentials for life - around Hive Primus. It was these same cycles which added credence to the scientist's belief that Hive Primus was in fact a living thing and the people and other degenerate species that dwelt within it merely parasites.

Working glowglobes were few and far between in the derelict dome and those that blazed overhead cast long shadows over some stretches of the wasteland while leaving other areas in a permanent twilight. The scientist looked up towards the cracked dome roof fifty metres above his head. The concave surface was covered in a riot of piping and cable bundles, and was riddled with holes. Some were mesh-covered vents, others were all that was left of lift shafts. All of them dark recesses within which all manner of things lurked, from rabid rats and vicious face-eaters to secrets not even the Inquisition knew about.

Struts of an elevator gantry still descended ten metres from a square hole, larger than the rest, directly above him. That was where the container must have been dropped from. Its crumpled base and the fractures running up its sides attested to that. But such cargo containers were built to last: they could survive a turbulent journey through the Warp in the bellies of space-faring freighters. The container must have originally been almost four metres tall. The once white plasteel casing had ruptured, exposing tubing and wires that spilled from the rent like the intestines of some cyborganic beast.

'Wait here, One-Eight-Seven,' the man addressed the servitor standing motionless next to him. The slave machine said nothing; its infra-sensor implant and human right eye both unblinking. As much metal as living flesh, it towered over the tall scientist. In place of a left arm it had a huge mechanical construct of wire bundles and hydraulic pistons that ended in a vice-like steel claw. Other cables were connected along the length of its spine, via vertebra connector ports, culminating at the base of its hairless skull. A scratched and acid-scoured brass plaque hung around its neck, engraved with now barely legible runes.

Pulling a battered motion detector from a pocket in his lab coat, the scientist turned a knurled brass knob next to a small display panel and, after a second or two, a grid of fine green lines appeared on the screen. Holding the detector in front of him, the man scanned the slag heap. Nothing. Cautiously the scientist began to climb the slate grey hillock. Nearing the top, and the container, the man suddenly froze as the motion detector began to emit a rapid bleeping and a white dot of light winked on and off on the display screen. Something was

moving in his direction.

With his eyes fixed on the cable-spilling rent, and his heart pounding, he began to back away slowly down the slope. As he watched, a creature - no longer than a man's arm - emerged from the broken cargo container on a myriad of legs. The scientist chuckled to himself as the hive-born vermin, looking like a cross between an elongated crab and a long-tailed chameleon, scuttled away over the top of the slag heap and down into the shadows on the other side. The sensor in his hand became silent again and quietened as the white dot faded.

Reaching the container, he peered cautiously inside. From his long years of experience the scientist could see quite clearly that the interior of the vessel had been modified to carry live cargo in a state of suspended animation. It was just as he had suspected; the saloon-bar rumours had been right for once. His source had done well and would be rewarded accordingly, the next time he needed patching up after a gang-squabble over disputed territory. There was only one problem: the cryo-suspension chamber was empty. As a result of the fall from Uphive and the container breaking open the cargo's cryo-sleep had been broken. The impact of the fall from Uphive had broken the container open. The creature was gone.

Turning around, the scientist descended the slag heap towards the still unmoving servitor. 'Well, One-Eight-Seven, it would appear that our guest has gone,' he said, addressing his cyborg slave once more. 'I think we're going to need some help with this one.'

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CHAOS REIGNED at the fungus farm of White Spore Stoop. Figures ran through the gloom; women and children were screaming in fear and confusion as the men-folk armed themselves with whatever lay to hand. Picking up a trenching tool, Silas Pendrell sprinted back to the fungus fields, the beam of his cap-mounted lamp lurching violently in all directions, catching terrified faces momentarily in its halogen light. Hurdling a wooden fence, he dashed over the raised soil ridges, crushing the soft flesh of sump mushrooms underfoot as he ran, sending clouds of spores into the air around him. With his scarf in place over his mouth and nose to protect him Silas ignored the spore-bursts as he raced through the choking clouds panting heavily, his heart straining inside his chest. Then he saw it. The beast had appeared as if from nowhere. One minute the farmers had been tending to their crop of bulbous, thick-stemmed, white mushrooms, the next the monster emerged from the gloom, roaring its rage,

and knocked Gil Yarrow flat with one swipe of its massive fist. Gil hadn't got up again. Before the others knew what was going on the beast had lifted Tem Slemor into the air yelling only to bring him down again and slammed him down across its knee. Tern's body, his back broken, crumpled lifelessly to the ground.

Silas looked at the hulking creature and knew what fear was. The beast held Gil's adolescent son, Porl, in one huge hand and the poor boy's right arm in the other. Porl was desperately scrabbling at the rough skin of the creature's arm. With a careless tug the arm came free at the shoulder as if it were nothing more than a rotten toadstool stalk. Porl's screaming was quickly silenced as the monster tossed the arm aside and used its now free hand to crush the boy's skull.

For a moment there was a pause in the fighting as the men recovered their breath and hardened their resolve. The beast stood unmoved, turning its head slowly to take in the cowering men around it. Veins bulged on its thick neck while it flexed its huge fingers, ready for the next challenge.

Silas looked up at the vicious creature. It seemed well over two metres tall. Humanoid in form, its body was a robust mass of muscle but its head spoke more of man's supposed primitive ancestry. Its forehead receded while its lower jaw jutted out beyond its upper lip, its mouth full of blunt yellow tusks. In all his years scraping a living as fungus farmer in Hive Bottom he had never heard of anything like this violent beast before. In some ways it was almost like the reptilian scabies that made allegiances with the devolved scavvies but its skin, although rough, wasn't scaly, it didn't have a tail and it wore a pair of crude britches.

The farmer suddenly realised that the monster was looking directly at him. The thing bellowed. In response Silas gave a shout and hurled himself at the beast, the trenching tool raised above his head. Before he could bring it down on the creature, he felt his improvised weapon clasped in an inflexible grip. As the monster lifted Silas into the air by the blade of the trenching tool, the desperate farmer saw muscles bulge in its arm. With a roar, the beast hurled Silas bodily across the field. He hit a fence post, which splintered under the impact, and slumped stunned among the broken mushrooms. He watched as the beast pounded towards the cluster of farm buildings. He tried to pick himself up but his back screamed out in pain, forcing Silas to slump to the ground again.

A shot rang out. At last, someone had found a gun. From where he lay, Silas could see into the heart of the homestead. Old Obadiah stood at the centre of the compound his ancient blunderbuss in his shaking hands. In his heightened

emotional state Silas suddenly found himself laughing - this would beat even one of the old man's far-fetched fireside tales. Before Obadiah could let off a second shot, the monster was on top of him. The old man pulled the trigger as the beast swept him aside with a backhanded swipe, the shrapnel peppering the side of the holestead's fuel tank. Clear liquid spurted from a number of holes, spraying the floor of the compound with fuel.

The beast bellowed again. Its guttural roar was answered by the growl of a combustion engine. The wooden door of a barn burst apart as the tractor smashed through it, driven by Silas's brother, Jed. Hydraulics whirring, the prongs on the fork-lift at the front of the tractor rose up, coming into line with the beast's broad barrel chest. Jed put his foot to the floor and drove the machine straight at the monster. Snarling, the creature grabbed the nearest weapon to hand, tearing a plank from the compound fence, and held it ready like a club.

When the tractor was mere metres from it, the beast leapt aside with surprising agility and in the same motion brought the plank around, breaking it across the back of Jed's head. Silas could only watch in horror as his brother slumped unconscious across the tractor's controls, turning the vehicle so that it was heading at speed, directly at the ruptured fuel tank. There was nothing anyone could do as the tractor ploughed into it. Metal scraped against metal, sending sparks raining down on the spreading pool of petrol. The flammable liquid ignited, flames leaping up around the tractor. The fuel tank erupted in a ball of orange fire and greasy black smoke as the rest of its contents ignited. Seconds later the tractor's fuel tank exploded, blowing the vehicle - and Silas's brother - apart.

Engine housings and sheared axles crashed down around the monster, which was making a curious barking noise. It was only as the beast turned its tusked head in his direction once more, and he saw the upturned corners of its malformed mouth that Silas realised that the monster was laughing.

The flames were spreading, the farm buildings closest to the fuel tank were already on fire, bathing the compound in unaccustomed illumination. The beast stood silhouetted against the backdrop of the burning holestead, the flicker of firelight playing over its green skin.

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WITH A HISS of compressed gas, the polished metal doors slid open and the bounty hunter entered the laboratory. Nathan Creed took in his new spacious surroundings at a glance: the operating table, the gleaming trolley of tools next

to it, the chrome shelves packed with coolant containers and the polished metal floor. The lab could almost be described as pristine. Here, in the unhygienic Underhive, it was positively immaculate. A converted cargo transport container, the lab's uniform rectangularity was broken only by the shelving units that filled half its space, like a suggestion of a labyrinth. What was on show here represented a fair few Guilder tokens. A doorway at the end of the lab led to a smaller unit containing the occupant's living quarters. Creed's eye was drawn to the motionless steel and flesh statue standing in the far corner of the laboratory.

'Creed,' the scientist sitting at a dissection unit addressed the bounty hunter, 'come in.' The tall, thin man put down the electronic implement he had been using to probe the robotic arm pinioned on the worktop in front of him.

The scientist seemed out of place in the immaculate lab: his coat was filth-stained and his personal appearance obviously wasn't of the same importance to him as the state of his working environment.

'Doc.' The bounty hunter adjusted his hat so that its wide brim shielded his eyes from the harsh fluorescent light. The same light reflected off the scientist's gleaming chromium head plate.

Doc Haze grimaced. 'Do you mind not smoking that in here?'

'Sure thing.' Creed took the cheroot out of his mouth and dropped it on the polished floor, crushing it firmly under his booted heel. 'I see you've got yourself a new friend,' the bounty-hunter said in his familiar downhive drawl.

Ah yes. One-Eight-Seven. Well after that incident at Fester Hole I missed that fool Veral, degenerate half-breed though he might have been.'

Doc Haze stood up and walked over to the cyborg. He tapped the slave machine's massive mechanical arm with a spanner, suddenly produced from a pocket, making the metal joints ring.

'Ex-Mechanicus. Picked him up at auction last month. Proving to be quite useful around the place, aren't you, One-Eight-Seven?' The servitor said nothing. 'So how's the arm?'

'Good,' Creed replied flexing and turning the muscles and sinews of his healed right arm, remembering how it had been broken during his encounter with Gator Kaynn's pet albino sumpgator. 'But enough small talk. What can I do for you?'

'I've got a job for you.'

'I'd kinda guessed as much.' Unconsciously Creed took another cheroot from a crumpled packet and took out a lighter. The scientist coughed and shook his head sternly. Suddenly remembering himself Creed put the smoke and lighter back in a deep pocket in his long leather coat. 'What sort of a job is it?'

‘Manhunt. Well, more of an alien hunt really,’ Doc Haze explained.

‘What do you mean?’

‘Here let me show you.’ The doctor picked up a data-slate from his worktop and, having flicked a switch on its side, handed it to the bounty hunter. After a few moments an image appeared on the screen, its resolution becoming crisper as the hand-held data-slate’s circuits warmed up. A pair of axes had been displayed on the viewing panel, the y-axis calibrated in metres. Standing on the x-axis were two ugly humanoid creatures, or rather two different elevations of one ugly creature. According to the measurements on the grid, the creature was two and a half metres tall. Its head was angular with a narrow forehead and wider jaw, from which protruded long tusks, and sat on a short neck between broad shoulders. Pointed ears jutted out bat-like and it had beady little eyes. If the scale was correct, the creature’s head was over half a metre long. The rest of the creature’s body was made up of muscle and more muscle, covered with rough green skin. It made a Goliath heavy look practically anorexic.

Creed looked up from the image on the data-slate at the Doc, his expression forming the query. ‘Hardly little green men, is it?’

‘It’s an ork,’ Doc Haze said, by way of explanation. ‘It’s an alien life form, not native to Necromunda, but found throughout the galaxy. In fact, some scholars believe orks are more widespread than mankind. It is also believed that orks are a genetically engineered warrior race. Fighting’s what they were bred for, fighting’s what they love and fighting’s what they do best! And there’s one loose in the Underhive.’

‘What’s it doing here?’

‘Rumour has it was headed for the Spire, would you believe? For Lord Helmawr’s private zoo. Story is it was brought in from off world by the Guilder Antrobus Vetch but the Arbites got wind of it. Some even say that Helmawr was being investigated by the Inquisition. Anyway, our mighty planetary governor wanted it got rid of fast and Vetch had to dump it. Where better than down here in the Underhive, out in the Badzones? He probably thought he could come back and pick it up later when the heat was off.’

‘But trouble is it got free and now you want me to catch it?’

‘That’s why you’re here. From what I’ve read, they really are fascinating creatures. It’s no wonder Helmawr wanted one for his menagerie. They have a very interesting reproductive cycle, you know. Their DNA is bonded at a molecular level with a fungus, giving them the ability to reproduce themselves asexually. When an ork dies it releases spores, which if they find the right conditions to grow in will eventually produce a womb-like cocoon under the ground in which a new ork will grow. Certain scientists have speculated that

orks even shed these spores on a more regular basis, just as humans shed skin cells constantly. The possibilities are quite incredible when you think about it.'

'Okay, enough with the xeno-biology. Just tell me how to find and how to kill it.'

'Oh, I don't want you to kill it,' Doc Haze said, taken aback. 'Whatever gave you that idea? I can't let a scientific opportunity like this pass me by.'

'Excuse me? Did I miss something, Doc?'

'I'm sorry, did I not say? Orks are renowned for their regenerative abilities. They can survive wounds that would prove fatal to a human. It's got something to do with their algal/fungal DNA base. It means that if an ork loses a limb it can be grafted back on after lying on a battlefield for hours with little risk of tissue damage. Even more amazingly, it allows for the crudest bionic implants to be grafted directly onto bodies without the danger of tissue rejection or necrosis around the implant connecting point.'

'Obviously any research I could carry out on a live specimen would improve my medical skills and surgical procedures no end. If I could introduce such orkoid powers into your average hiver or be able to replace missing limbs for a patient so that he could be up and fighting again in a matter of hours rather than days or weeks, think how it would revolutionise gang warfare! Gangs would be queuing up to pay those extra credits for my unique surgical skills.'

'Money,' Creed sighed. There was no hint of a judgmental comment in his words however; after all, he himself was a bounty hunter. Credits and trader tokens were what kept Hive Primus living and breathing and they gave a purpose to the lives of the pitiful millions trapped within its plascrete and ceramite walls, and never more so than in the Underhive.

'Let me get this straight, you want me to bring this thing in alive?'

'That's right. Now it's not going to be easy, I know, but that's why I'm hiring you. You'll take the job, of course.'

'You know me, Doc. If the money's right...'

'Four hundred credits if you bring it in alive.'

Creed took a moment to ponder the deal. 'Done,' he said at last.

'You'll need this,' the doctor said, opening a drawer and taking out a large handgun with a barrel that tapered to a thick, syringe-like needle at the tip.

'Looks like a needle pistol,' the experienced Underhive gunslinger commented.

'It's a tranq gun. Got enough adroxinil to drop a synth-ox on 'slaught. Twenty doses to be exact. But you'll have to get up close to use it.'

The doctor handed the tranquilliser gun to Creed. The bounty hunter

weighed it in his hand and turned it, inspecting every detail on the barrel and every mark on the stock.

‘By my calculations four or five doses should be enough to knock out an ork,’ the scientist went on, ‘and I don’t expect you to literally bring it in. These things can weigh up to two hundred kilograms each. When you’ve taken it down call me on this.’ Doc Haze tossed a battered vox-set communicator over to the bounty hunter who caught it deftly in one callused hand.

‘It shouldn’t be hard to find. Start out at Ripperjack Reach, you’ll find a discarded cargo container there, and then follow the trail of destruction. Like I said, orks love a fight. Any questions?’

‘Just one,’ Creed said, grinning like a ripperjack. ‘Where exactly did you get your qualification, Doc?’

‘Same place you got yours,’ the doctor said, sitting down again. This was the eccentric scientist’s way of saying that the conversation was over, the deal done.

Secreting the tranq gun inside the folds of his long, leather coat, Creed strode towards the door. He could already feel his pulse rate starting to rise: the hunt was on.

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THE DOC HAD been right: it hadn’t been hard to track the ork. Deep-set alien footprints in the grey soil led Creed from the slag heap into the depths of the Badzones and along a trail of mindless destruction. But it was nothing compared to what he found when he reached the fungus farm.

Before he even reached White Spore Stoop the smell of the burning fungus fields was carried to his nostrils by the fan-breezes. Entering the dome through a wide access tunnel, he saw at once the still smouldering barns and other farm buildings. The survivors had managed to douse most of the blaze but burning debris had been carried into the fields by the thermals and, by the looks of things, an explosion, setting fire to the crop still in the soil. This year’s harvest was ruined.

Creed entered the compound. Women and children were doing their best to put out the last of the fires but it seemed that not a single building had been left untouched. Some women were weeping while others tended to their men folk and their injuries. The burnt out wreckage of a tractor protruded from the remains of a fuel storage tank. The bounty hunter could see a number of bodies lying to one side of the compound, barely covered by a bloodstained tarpaulin.

‘What happened here?’ Creed asked a man, sitting with his back to a fence,

an arm in a sling and his head wrapped in a bandage.

The farmer looked up at Creed and seemed to take a moment to focus on him. 'It came out of nowhere,' the man muttered. 'Have you two come to help us?'

Probably suffering from concussion, Creed decided. 'What did this?' he asked.

'Don't rightly know,' a woman piped up. 'Big and green it was, but it wasn't a scaly.'

'Let me guess: it was about this tall,' Creed drawled, raising his hand to an arm's length above his head, 'and it had tusks.'

'That's right. How did you know?'

Creed didn't answer but looked out into the gloom beyond the smouldering compound, in the opposite direction from which he had come. Putting a cheroot between his lips he picked up half-burnt plank and lit the cigar with the glowing embers at its tip.

How could one creature create such carnage, he wondered?

'Was it armed?'

'No, it didn't need to be.'

There were six dead here and at least another ten injured, not to mention a farm that had been razed to the ground. Instinctively Creed put his hands on his holstered stub guns. 'What are we dealing with here, girls?' he whispered under his breath.

'Stranger, help us,' the woman suddenly burst out pleading, tears streaking her soot-grimed cheeks.

'Sorry, ma'am, I'm just passing through,' he said. 'Which way did it go?'

The woman sank to her knees sobbing. Slowly she raised her arm, pointing north.

'Much obliged,' the bounty hunter said and went on his way.

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THE STACCATO drumming of gunfire rattled around the ruined factory sheds, echoing off corroded walls of corrugated iron. The ork's lips curled in what might have been a smile. It sniffed the air, picking up the scent of cordite, gunpowder and energised plasma. The alien creature grunted to itself and stepped through a hole in a wall that took it closer to the heart of the abandoned factory complex and the battle raging within. Having crossed a polluted watercourse and finding itself at the edge of another ruined dome, it had been attracted to the carcasses of the construction sheds by the sound of

weapons being discharged and the shouts of frenzied gangers. At last it could look forward to a decent fight.

The incident with the ferryman had done nothing to relieve any of its aggression, although it had provided the ork with a harpoon gun, usually used to hunt giant raft spiders. It hefted the sturdily made weapon in its great, green hands, eager to try it out. It had already acquired two other weapons on its rampage through the human settlements. There was an axe from the farm tucked into the belt of its britches and a well-worn heavy stubber, wrested from the hands of large mohican-haired man, was slung over its back. The ork had also taken the man's studded harness - it liked the crudely-fashioned iron skull that was central to its design - and wore one of his hands on a chain around its neck, the urge to collect trophies another consequence of its genetic pre-programming. The ammo belts for the huge gun were slung across its chest.

The ork advanced with surprising stealth between the derelict crane gantries and dead power turbines. Rounding a still-standing bulkhead it saw the two groups of humans engaged in the shootout. To one side a gang of men in blue tunics and black leather facemasks were holed up behind the columns and ranged over the high walkways close to the factory wall. Their opponents, all of them wild-haired females, only partially arrayed in pieces of tiger-striped or leopard-spotted cloth, sheltered behind conveyor belts and lifting machinery that had ground to a halt long ago. Both sides were doing their best to blow their opponents to kingdom come with an assortment of guns.

What they were fighting over didn't matter to the ork. All that mattered was that they were fighting. Adrenal glands kicked in, flooding the alien's system with stimulant chemicals and filling it with the urge to join the battle. The strong muscle of its heart pounding, unable to contain itself anymore, the ork let out a bellowing roar of battlelust and charged into the fray.

The harpoon flew from the spider-hunting gun and found its mark in the stomach of a hooded man high on an overhanging platform. As the man toppled from the platform towards the factory floor below the ork threw the discharged harpoon gun at another man and swung the heavy stubber round, pulling on the trigger handle as it did so. Before the falling ganger even hit the ground, three of his companions were gunned down in a hail of bullets as the stubber roared into life. Swinging the flame-scorched muzzle of the heavy weapon round the ork took out several of the women, as round after round shredded the tracks of the conveyor belts.

There was a moment of confused calm as the two gangs realised that the great green monster wasn't working for their enemies and stopped firing on each other. Almost as one the men and women brought their guns to bear on

the creature and began firing again but by now the ork was moving. As it stomped through the wreckage of the construction shed it found its mark again and again with the huge gun that it held as if it was nothing more than a las-pistol, spent cartridges showering down around its feet.

A thickset woman rose from her hiding place, in front of the creature, and hefted a bulky heavy bolter onto her shoulder. As the ork brought its own massive gun to bear another woman flew at it from out of the shadows and fired off a volley of darts from a crossbow-like device attached to her arm. The stubber roared again and the thickset woman fell forward. In her death-spasm she fired the heavy bolter sending a chugging stream of explosive shells into the ground in front of the ork. The alien was unconcerned, ignoring the darts sticking out of its bulging bicep: it was already concentrating on its next target. In one fluid movement it pulled the axe from its belt and hurled it at the woman with the crossbow. She was thrown off her feet as the axe cleaved into her skull.

The women were running now, screaming to each other as they fled from the ruined factory. But not so the masked men. From their elevated positions on the wrought-iron walkways the gangers caught the creature in their sights and fired. Calling down damnation upon the alien blasphemy as they let fly with their weapons, it soon became clear that their faith was surer than their aim. A ball of super-heated, blazing green fire streaked past the creature's head. Then a stray bullet clipped the ork's side and the hulking brute replied with its own bellowing war cry: 'Waaaaaggghh!'

This time the stubber found a heavy-set man, wearing an iron faceplate, standing braced against an iron pillar and holding a large, but unfortunately for him a recharging, plasma weapon. Stub gunfire tore through his ribcage and into the energising chamber of the plasma gun. The weapon exploded like a miniature supernova, vaporising the faceplated man and melting through the metal column behind him. The ork raised one massive hand to protect its eyes from the searing blast and so only heard the walkways, strewn with masked gangers, come crashing to the floor of the factory as the main support pillar collapsed, having been melted through at its base. When the alien looked again all it could see amidst a cloud of dust and ash was a mass of twisted metal debris and mangled, skewered bodies.

One remaining ganger got unsteadily to his feet, looking around him in bewilderment as if he didn't know where he was. The ork took pleasure in unhurriedly fitting a new belt feed into the huge gun. It began to laugh, in its barking way, as it levelled the reloaded stubber.

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AS THE LAST Cawdor fell, Creed realised that his moment had come. He had watched almost the whole battle from his vantage as he clambered around on the girders up near the factory roof. The ork had advanced right under his position as it had blown the ganger away. The bounty hunter wasn't going to get a better opportunity than this. Gripping the tranquilliser gun firmly in his right hand, he left go of the rail he was holding with his left and dropped directly onto the ork.

Creed hit the alien's broad back and for a split second was stunned as the air was knocked out of him and also because the ork stayed exactly where it was. He had half expected the beast to be floored by the impact of him dropping onto it from a gantry six metres up. This thing's tougher than a scaly he thought.

Recovering himself, Creed flung his left arm around the ork's thick neck and held on tight as he rammed the tip of the tranq gun into a bulging vein. Four or five doses, the Doc said, he went over in his mind. Well better make it six, just to be sure. Pulling the trigger that operated the injection needle Creed pumped adroxinil into the monster. One, two, three -

A huge hand grabbed the bounty hunter's coat and, unable to do anything to prevent it, Creed felt himself being yanked from the ork's back. One moment he was delivering the tranq gun's payload of knockout narcotic and the next he was flying through the air, upside down, only to come crashing down on top of the body of a dead Escher. He knew instinctively that his moment was gone and that unless he got moving pretty fast he wasn't going to get another one!

Stubber rounds kicking up debris from the fallen walkways behind him Creed ran for cover. The three doses he had already given the ork didn't even seem to be slowing it down! As he ran, he pocketed the tranquilliser gun and unholstered his more familiar stub guns. They were an impressive pair of hand-cannons, his girls, and they had got him through a fair few scrapes. Ducking behind a sturdy bulkhead the bounty hunter counted to ten under his breath to calm himself and then came out guns blazing.

Nathan Creed was renowned from Toxic Sump to Fester Hole for being a crackshot with his two, point six-six calibre, solid-shot stub guns and plenty of once wanted men, dead or otherwise, had the gunshot wounds to prove it.

With his first two bullets he ripped open the ork's shoulder. The third blew a hole clean through its thigh while the fourth removed one of its fingers. The alien brute still hadn't had time to turn and face this new onslaught as Creed prepared to take a headshot. Then he remembered the conditions of the job; he

didn't want to miss out on the bounty just because he'd bungled a perfectly simple contract.

'The Doc wants you alive,' he drawled as he adjusted his aim, 'so I guess it's your lucky day.'

The fifth shot ricocheted off the stubber's chamber housing but the sixth found its mark at the point where the belt magazine entered the gun's breach. There was the painful squeal of metal buckling and the stubber ceased firing. The weapon had jammed, its internal workings mangled as a result of Creed's pinpoint bullet.

The ork grunted in surprise and, suddenly forgetting the bounty hunter, began thumping the stubber with a huge fist in the vain hope of unjamming the ruined weapon. Hearing the clatter of chains the enraged alien looked up in time to see the massive iron crane hook hurtling directly towards it.

The heavy hook slammed into the side of the ork's head, tearing away half its face. The monster turned, leering at Creed. He could see its exposed cheekbone and molars, while the torn flap of flesh hung uselessly from its jaw. Then, slow as a toppling pylon, the ork crashed to the ground.

'You sure are one ugly alien freak,' Creed said, looking down at the stunned ork. 'Lucky for you the Doc ordered plenty of beauty sleep.' The bounty hunter knelt down next to the huge body and emptied the tranq gun's entire contents into the alien's bloodstream. The thing stank. 'Sleep well,' he said with a grin.

The ork grunted and half opened its eyes. Creed leapt back.

'What the skav are you?' he shouted at the beast, continuing to back away. 'What the hell does it take to put you down?'

Drunkenly the ork got to its feet. It swayed unsteadily for a moment, adjusting its footing as if it was trying to get its balance on a sump raft, and seemed to be having trouble focusing. Then its gaze found Creed and an ominous growl rose from its throat. Raising the useless heavy stubber in its power glove-sized hands by the barrel, as if it were a club of some kind, the ork staggered towards Creed, ready to bludgeon the bounty hunter to death. It hadn't gone more than five paces when its trunk-like legs gave way beneath it and it came crashing down again on the hard floor of the factory. As its chin struck an old gas pipe there was a loud crack and a discoloured, tusk-shaped lump of ivory rolled against the tip of Creed's boot.

Taking the battered comm-link from inside his coat, Creed turned a knurled brass dial and spoke into the vox unit. 'Doc? If you want your ork you'd better come and get it.' The message delivered he flicked the communicator off again and dropped it into a pocket.

Looking down again at the prone body of the ork, Creed gave the beast one

last vicious kick in the side of its head. 'Sleep that one off, you big green bastard,' he spat.

* * *

WITH WHEEZING, pistoning steps, the servitor marched back into the lab, servos protesting under the weight of the ork that it carried in its arms as if it was a baby. If it had been a strain for the slave machine to carry the two hundred kilogram mass of the alien over ten kilometres it didn't show it. 'One-Eight-Seven,' the doctor said, 'secure the patient.'

The servitor carried the comatose alien over to the solid stainless steel operating table at the back of the lab which, Creed noticed, had been modified by the addition of a number of thick kevlar straps. Whatever was tied down on that table wouldn't be getting free in a hurry, even if it were able to move. One-Eight-Seven laid the ork down roughly on the gurney and began securing its legs.

'Now, Doc, the matter of my fee,' Creed said, getting back to business.

'Ah, of course,' Doc Haze replied, as if his failure to mention it already had been due to a lapse of memory rather than an intentional oversight. 'Two hundred and fifty, wasn't it?'

The bounty hunter smiled coldly. 'Now come on, Doc. Don't try that with me, not after the Fester Hole incident. Four hundred credits was the deal and I even brought back your tranq gun.'

'But you damaged it,' the doctor retorted, pointing at the ork. 'Look, half its face is missing. I hope you haven't hurt it too badly.'

'What did you expect? It fought like a daemon!' Creed hands dropped to his sides. 'Now do you want to settle up or would you rather discuss the matter with my two, wide calibre associates?'

'Four hundred then,' Doc Haze said with none of his usual joviality. 'If you'll bear with me for a minute, I've got it here somewhere.' The scientist walked over to a gleaming white unit and started rummaging unnecessarily around in a drawer.

Some people will do anything to avoid paying up, Creed considered.

As he waited for the doctor to go through his charade of looking for the credits Creed looked around the lab once more. There seemed to be a large number of drums containing chemicals used in cryogenic freezing stored in the lab at present.

Doc Haze must be planning to use a fair bit in his new improved surgical techniques and this stuff isn't easy to get hold of, Creed thought. The Doc's

obviously been stocking up for a while. I wonder how long he's known about the deal with the ork? And I wonder who dropped Antrobus Vetch in it with the Arbites?

A roar accompanied by the screeching of tearing metal made both men spin round. The ork was sitting up on the operating table holding a mechanical limb in one hand. The metal claw attached to it flexed spasmodically. Next to the gurney One-Eight-Seven stood stock still, confusion written on its half-human features as its onboard cogitator engine tried to process what had happened. Almost carelessly, the ork swung the arm at the servitor, smashing it across the side of the head and knocking it to the floor. The red lens of its bionic eye shattered. The cyborg twitched for a moment, coruscating bolts of electricity playing over its entire body, and then it was still.

Aghast the two men stared at the ork. The alien looked back at them with drug-glazed eyes and then shook its head as if trying to shake off its stupor. It started to pull at the straps buckled tightly around its legs.

'By Helmawr's rump!' Creed gasped in amazement.

'Are you sure you gave it enough adroxinil?' Doc Haze asked, despite the desperate nature of the situation.

'I pumped enough tranq into that beast to make a scaly sleep for a week!' the bounty hunter exclaimed.

'Well it's not sleeping now.'

'I can see that, Doc!' Creed snapped back.

'So do something!'

'Don't worry, I intend to.'

Fast as quicksilver Creed had pulled both stub guns from their holsters and was pulling back the cocking hammers as the ork swung its legs off the operating table. The bounty hunter shot off a couple of rounds as he ran across the lab at the brute, feeling the familiar recoil in his wrists, and chunks of flesh were blasted out of the alien's torso.

'Creed! Don't kill it!' Doc Haze screamed over the blasting of the stub guns.

Creed faltered in his charge, his last shot going wide and sending the table of scalpels, clamps and saws flying, the medical instruments rattling over the polished metal floor. 'For skav's sake!' Creed muttered half under his breath. His mind racing he tried to think of an alternative way to put the ork out of action.

He didn't hesitate for long but it was enough for the enraged, and rapidly recovering, ork. The servitor's still twitching robot arm connected with his midriff and the bounty hunter was swept aside by the blow. Creed slid across the lab and lay where he came to rest, amid the scattered surgical tools, gasping

for air and wincing in pain as he did so; he was sure the blow had broken a few ribs.

The bounty hunter now out of range of the ork's anger the monster turned on the closer Doc Haze who had backed into a corner. The creature stomped towards the scientist.

Doc Haze looked up into the face of his killer: the beady yellow eyes; the flaring nostrils; the exposed bone of its jaw; the tusked split of its misshapen mouth dripping with saliva. The stink of the thing washed over him. Panicking he pushed himself even further back into the corner, clutching behind him in desperation for anything that might help him. A sweaty palm closed on a cylindrical plastic handle and as he pulled it round in front of him he felt the electrical flex attached to it uncoil. In his hand, he held a bone-saw. The business end of the gruesome-looking surgical implement was a long serrated blade. The doctor flicked a switch on its side and with a high-pitched whine, like a phosphorfly trapped in a specimen jar, the toothed edge of the blade began to whiz around the knife like a tiny chainsword.

The ork brought a hand down towards the doctor's head, as if it was intent on seeing what was inside his chrome dome! In response, Doc Haze brought the buzzing bone-saw up and with both hands gripping the handle forced it into the alien's arm below the elbow. Before the ork knew what was going on the blade had sliced cleanly through flesh and bone alike and its right hand fell onto the floor. Hot crimson blood pumped from the wound over the doctor's already filthy lab coat.

Seemingly unconcerned, the ork glanced down at its own hand lying at its feet. Then pain and anger took effect. The alien lunged at the scientist, clutching at the man as if it still had both hands, giving Doc Haze the chance to dodge free of its grasp. The crazed scientist ran to Creed's side and helped the bounty hunter who was getting painfully to his feet. The ork started to advance towards them.

'You still want it alive, Doc?' Creed asked, grimacing as pain flared in his chest.

'No, you fool!' Doc Haze screamed at him. 'Kill it! Kill it now!'

'Now you're starting to make some sense at last,' Creed said and managed a grin. 'Come on girls, it's time to dance.'

Both index fingers compressed triggers and the stub guns belched their leaden cargo in the ork's direction. Round after round slammed into the thick muscle of the monster's arms, legs and body but still the greenskin came at them. It just seemed to soak up the bullets, which now appeared unlikely to even slow it down let alone kill the beast!

‘Are you too stupid to even know when you’re dead?’ Creed bellowed at the alien.

Taking careful aim with both guns, he fired two rounds at the monster’s head. The ork’s face exploded in a scarlet eruption. Smoke and blood obscuring his vision, Creed wiped his eyes clear with a sleeve of his coat. When he looked back at the alien, he could hardly believe what he saw.

The creature continued to advance, fixing him with one blazing yellow eye - but then it only had one eye left as half its skull was missing. What Creed took to be the creature’s brain was visible through a mess of bone and skin. It was as if a milliasaur had taken a bite out of the ork’s head. The monster tried to open its mouth but its jaw was broken and, besides, most of its tongue was missing too. Despite bullet holes riddling its torso and half its head gone the creature charged.

The ork half ran and half fell at Creed. The fist powering towards his stomach, however, was definitely not carried by momentum alone. Creed twisted his spine around in an attempt to avoid the blow and felt his broken ribs send knives of white-hot pain stabbing through his body. The punch landed, lifting him bodily off the ground, and breaking yet more ribs, sending new daggers of agony lancing through his torso. For the moment in which he still knew what was going on he thought he was going to be sick. Then he smashed into the regimented lines of shelves, rocking the units so that the chemical tubs stacked on them came tumbling down around him. He could taste the coppery tang of blood in his mouth.

Through a haze of concussion, Creed was just able to make out the blurred shape of the ork stumbling towards him. A white plastic drum landed in his lap, knocking what little air was left in his lungs out of him, and making him look at it. Around the side of the container in black stencilled runes were the words, ‘Warning! Liquid Nitrogen.’

The ork came a step closer the smashed glass of a phial crunching under its foot and demanding Creed’s attention again. His vision obscured by grey patches in front of his eyes now it was the bounty hunter’s turn to try to shake awareness back into his brain.

He could see more shelves behind the ork stacked high with drums stencilled with the same warning, ‘Liquid Nitrogen’. The creature was getting closer by the second. If he didn’t do something soon Creed doubted he would ever do anything again. Doing his best to ignore the concussion and focus on the imminent danger of sudden, violent death, Creed took aim and fired. On the third shot, he hit his target. The large coolant drum fractured and the ork was suddenly bathed in a shower of freezing liquid which steamed as it came into

contact with the air, a great white fog obscuring it from Creed's view.

Slowly the chemical mist cleared as the last of the liquid nitrogen evaporated into the surrounding atmosphere. Before the bounty hunter stood a glittering, yet hideous, statue. White frost covered the ork's quick-frozen ravaged body. Creed took aim one last time and fired. The dum dum bullet hit the frozen ork, high velocity converting into devastating force in an instant as the round impacted against the alien's brittle flesh. The shockwave from the impact rippled through the frozen form and the ork's body shattered, shards of icy green flesh tinkling down on the laboratory floor like a thousand splintered icicles. What was left of the creature's head rolled against Creed's leg, the only part of the creature that was still recognisably ork.

The bounty hunter slumped back against the tubular metal shelves and prepared to give himself up to unconsciousness. Closing his eyes against the harsh neon glow of the florescent lights, he listened to the fizzing and cracking of the pooling liquid nitrogen as it froze mere centimetres from his feet.

The crunch of footsteps breaking the thin film of ice on the floor made Creed unwillingly open his eyes again. Doc Haze stood over him, the now silent surgical tool gripped in his hand.

'So that'll be two hundred credits then,' the scientist said, smiling weakly.

'What?' said a dazed Creed in reply.

'Half bounty for delivering the ork dead rather than alive.'

'But when you brought the brute in it was still alive,' Creed explained, pain and exhaustion the only things keeping his growing anger in check.

'Then there's the damage done to the lab,' the doctor went on.

Ignoring him the bounty hunter took a cheroot from a crumpled packet and put it to his lips.

'And liquid nitrogen isn't easy to get hold of down here. You have to pay premium rate.'

Creed took the lighter from his pocket and flicked the burner aflame.

'So at the end of the day I calculate that you owe me one hundred credits. And do you mind not smoking in my lab?'

Creed lit the cheroot and took a long drag on the smouldering cigar. He exhaled loudly, blowing the smoke at the increasingly edgy scientist.

'Look, Doc,' he said, gesturing with a loaded stub gun, 'do you want to discuss this with my associates?'

* * *

THE FAN-WINDS were cold out here, at the edge of the Badzones. Pulling his

long coat tighter about him thin frame the tall figure crouched down behind the battered carcass of the cryogenic cargo container and began his examination of the area. The distant light of irregularly positioned glowglobes reflected off the shiny metal plate that made up half the dome of the man's head. Below the half-chromium pate wisps of dirty, long white hair twisted in the breeze.

Not far away the repaired servitor stood waiting for its master to finish his work, scanning the doctor's work on the slag heap with a cracked red-glass eye. Its reattached mechanical limb twitched from time to time: the damage done to its circuits by the ork would have some lasting effects.

Doc Haze stood suddenly upright and gave a whoop of joy: 'I've found it! I knew it! I knew it would be here, One-Eight-Seven!'

Removing a glass specimen jar from a pocket of his lab coat the scientist bent down again. Carefully he lifted a piece of rubbish away from the corner of the crumpled container, revealing the curious, pointed green toadstools that were poking up through the grey-black soil underneath. Chuckling to himself, he began gently brushing spores from the gills of the fungi with a fine-haired brush into the jar.