



# FIRESTARTER

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‘WELL, SOMEONE KNOWS who it was!’ Antrobus Vetch yelled at the cowering Gravalax Mune, his reedy voice becoming even more high-pitched as he berated his underling. ‘Someone informed the Arbites that the cargo had been brought into Hive Primus. We’ve already established it was those whispering Delaque snakes from the Network who first found out about it, but it wasn’t them who told the authorities, was it, hmm?’

‘No, my lord,’ Mune replied, ‘we are certain of that. The Network are information-brokers. They sold the information about the deal on to a third party. Your spies have confirmed that much.’

‘Yes, my agents are very thorough,’ Vetch said, suddenly quietly conspiratorial. He fixed his servant with his beady, black pinpricks of eyes. ‘Well some of them are,’ he added, ‘but that doesn’t change the fact that someone else informed the Adeptus Arbites, does it, hmm?’

‘No, my lord,’ Mune responded weakly.

‘Well how do you suggest we find out who did, hmm?’ Vetch screeched, flecks of spittle flying from his thin lips.

Gravalax Mune averted his gaze from the enraged Guilder, unable to bear his piercing gaze. His heart pounding, Mune desperately tried to think of a solution to Vetch’s problem but his mind with fogged with panic. All he could think of was what his master might do to him if he didn’t come up with a decent suggestion, or rather what the Guilder would get his servitor slaves to do to him.

Antrobus Vetch wasn’t an imposing man physically. He was tiny, well under two metres tall, with spindly limbs and a head that seemed slightly overlarge in proportion to the rest of his body. The overall effect made Vetch seem like an overgrown infant. The long, jade green robe that he wore did nothing to detract from this appearance: when he stood up it covered his feet and dragged along the ground behind him.

But it was the power he wielded that was terrifying. He controlled practically all the trade in the sector, from Tunnel Town and Steel Canyon as far as Toxic Sump and Mercury Falls. Several gangs, including the notorious Orlock Dangar’s Dogs, were in his pay. He ran a mining operation at Downer’s Deep

and effectively owned the populace of Piston Broke. At his word previously prosperous gangs had been declared outlaw, whole mutant settlements had been razed to the ground and half the local Ratskin tribes paid him fealty. It seemed that there wasn't anyone in the sector who didn't either owe Vetch a favour or have good reason to want the Guilder dead, and in a fair number of cases both. But Vetch was rich and riches bought good protection.

But wealth wasn't enough for Antrobus Vetch. What he wanted was acceptance from those he saw as his equals in the Spire. He wanted out of the Underhive and the ork had been his ticket uphive, until person or persons, as yet unknown, had sabotaged the smuggling operation! The ork had been destined for the private zoo of the planetary governor, Lord Helmawr himself. Vetch had wasted thousands on bribing off-world contacts, not a credit of which he would ever see again, thanks to the interference of the Network's client. And now Gravalax Mune was facing the wrath of the thwarted Guilder.

His mind racing, trying to think of a way out of the apparent impasse they had reached in trying to uncover Vetch's betrayers, Mune took in the chamber around him, as if looking for inspiration from anywhere at all.

Vetch's lair was sumptuously decorated as befitted a Guilder of his power and influence. Turquoise velvet drapes jostled with colourful, spider-silk wall hangings for the eye's attention. The glittering, stained glass dome of the chamber - depicting the skull and portcullis badge of the Merchant Guild - was supported at regular intervals by Malvolion jade-marble pillars. To these were chained Vetch's veiled and voluptuous concubines, none of whom wore any item of apparel that might detract from the beauty of their physical form.

The small man leaned forward in his throne, knuckles whitening as his talon-like fingers gripped the arms. 'Well if we were waiting for you to think of a plan we'd be here 'til the feast of the Emperor's Ascension,' Vetch ranted. 'So it's a good thing that I already have one, isn't it, hmm?'

Mune breathed a sigh of relief. 'Please would you enlighten your humble servant, my lord?'

'We already know of someone who knows the identity of our informer,' Vetch said, a thin smile spreading across his pale lips.

'We do?' Mune said, a glimmer of hope entering his consciousness. Maybe he wasn't bound for Vetch's prison mine after all. Concentrating, he tried to marshal his thoughts. Then it came to him and he was filled with a renewed sense of foreboding: 'You don't mean'

'The Network! Of course I do!'

Mune looked anxiously from one servitor to the next and found himself wondering how he'd look with a rock drill in place of an arm. 'But the Network

have been declared outlaws. You did it yourself for their part in ruining the deal. There's a bounty on all their heads. Every two-bit gang from here to the Effluous will be on their tail, hoping to get even a fraction of the reward you're offering.'

'Which is why you have to find them first,' Vetch snapped, the smile gone from his face, 'or to be more precise, their leader. What's his name? Sisken, isn't it, hmm?'

'I believe so, my lord.'

'Well then, what are you waiting for?' Vetch sank back into his throne. 'Hire someone to capture Sisken if you have to and then do whatever's necessary to extract the information we require.'

'Yes, my lord,' Mune replied without any sense of optimism.

Mune bowed, turned and walked sullenly towards the bulkhead doors at the end of the chamber, two servitors dropping into line behind him.

'Oh and Mune?'

Mune turned back to his spiteful employer: 'My lord?'

'No mistakes. It can get very cold at the bottom of Deep Three in Stalag Slag Hole, you know, hmm?'

WITH RATTLING THUDS three cylindrical metal objects landed in the centre of the compound of an old water treatment plant. The anxious Delaque gangers stationed around the compound turned to see what had made the noise. In a series of small explosions the photon flash flare grenades detonated. The effect was that of three small suns going supernova in the centre of the compound, bathing the treatment plant and the Delaques in blinding white light.

Photo-visor in place, Nathan Creed - downhive desperado, hired gun and sharp-shooting bounty hunter - grabbed the chain links of the fence in front of him and started to climb. In four heartbeats he was over the razor wire-topped fence. In another three he had crossed the compound. It took only one to drop the screaming, disorientated leader with a tensed, flat-handed chop to the back of the man's neck. Creed caught the unconscious man as he slumped forwards and hefted the Delaque's dead weight over his shoulder. Without even breaking a sweat he covered the twenty metres to the gate.

A wide-muzzled stub gun, held in one hand, barked twice and the stumbling gate sentries fell. A third shot shattered the padlock holding the gates shut. Kicking them open with a booted foot the bounty hunter was through and out into the wastes of the badzones.

From the moment the grenades had detonated the whole operation had all taken less than a minute.

By the time any of the gangers recovered, their blurred vision slowly returning, Sisken, their leader, and the bounty hunter were long gone.

‘HERE HE IS, boss,’ the hairy scummer said, pushing the doctor roughly before Gravalax Mune.

The Guilder agent looked the scientist up and down, taking in the long lab coat buttoned to the neck, smeared with blood and engine oil. A shiny metal plate made up half the dome of the scientist’s head, and long, straggly white hair hung down to his shoulders below it.

‘Doctor Isaiah Haze, I presume,’ the man said with a snide grin.

‘That’s right,’ Haze said, wringing his bony hands nervously, ‘but most people call me Doc.’

Haze in turn studied the gangling figure in front of him. He was as thin as a lashworm and, from the grim set of his features, Haze could easily believe he had the temperament to match. The man wore voluminous purple robes that billowed around his scarecrow-like form when he moved, like a face-eater caught in a vent-gale. Hung around his neck on a heavy chain was the skull badge of the Merchant Guild. But what stood out more than any of this was the crest of his employer, an entwined gothic A and V, tattooed onto his forehead, his slicked-back hair making it stand out even more. Two imposing servitors - each bearing powerful-looking robotic limbs with cruelly sharp claws and crushing vices in place of hands - flanked the Guilder agent.

‘And you are?’ Haze asked, turning his attention back to the scarecrow.

‘Mune. Gravalax Mune. Bond-servant of Guilder Antrobus Vetch.’

Doc Haze felt decidedly uncomfortable. He had been removed from his lab by two Underhive scum, who he had taken for gangers in need of his considerable surgical skills and had then dragged him into the badzones to this place - the ruined shell of an Ecclesiarchy chapel - to bring him before an agent of one of the most feared and powerful men in the Underhive.

The doctor looked around him. Fractured pieces of soot-blackened stained glass windows still clung to the leaded rims of gothic window arches. A granite pulpit, the faces of the figures carved around its sides defaced by heretics long ago, stood before the broken plinth of an altar. Ten metres above it hung a dusty black marble Imperial eagle, its wings outstretched over the end of the nave, its two heads surveying the scene below with cold stone eyes. The place must have been abandoned centuries ago as the city-mountain of Hive Primus grew ever upwards, taking the righteous with it, leaving only the wretched, the dispossessed and vermin to worship at this shrine to the Emperor of humanity.

‘What can I do for you, Mune?’

‘I want you to perform an operation for me. A very delicate operation.’

‘And why couldn’t it have been performed in my lab?’

‘How shall I put this?’ Mune mused. ‘It is a sensitive matter. You will be handsomely rewarded, of course.’ There was never any suggestion that Haze would refuse and the doctor knew better than to even try.

‘Well, where am I supposed to work? Where are the tools I’ll need? And where’s the patient?’ Haze asked irritably, continuing to wring his hands in anxiety.

‘This way,’ Mune said turning and walking towards an archway in one wall. His hulking cyborg bodyguards followed. Feeling the muzzle of an autopistol pressed against his back, reluctantly Haze followed, accompanied by his own foul-smelling, unshaven ”bodyguards”, their feet crunching on the broken tesserae of the ancient mosaic floor.

Mune led the way down a flight of wide, shallow steps into a vaulted crypt. And then Doc Haze saw something which made his heart leap.

Standing in the centre of the chamber was a reclining chair of gleaming steel sections and brass attachments. Numerous telescoping arms emerged from the upper part of the chair, ending in magnifying lenses, cutting blades and syringes. The gothic piece of antiquated machinery was supported by a brass pedestal, which had yet more pedals and levers sprouting from it. Iron clamps at strategic places completed the ensemble. It looked as if the device had been designed with maximum discomfort in mind.

‘I know it’s not what you’re used to,’ Mune said, taking in the crypt with a wave of an arm.

‘Amazing,’ the Underhive surgeon gasped. ‘It’s beautiful. A work of art.’

‘Sorry?’ Mune looked at the doctor, his brow furrowing. ‘Oh, I see. The chair. Yes, I suppose it is.’

‘What I wouldn’t give for one of these.’

‘Doctor?’

‘Huh?’ Haze looked up, Mune’s enquiry shaking him from his reverie. ‘Um, what procedure was it you wanted me to perform, exactly?’

‘A cerebral fluid extraction,’ Mune stated. ‘I believe that it’s colloquially known as a ”brain drain”.’

Doc Haze looked at the stick-thin man in amazement.

‘You have performed one before, haven’t you?’ Mune asked, a hint of concern creeping into his voice.

‘Of course,’ Haze lied, excited at the prospect of being able to use the arcane surgical device. He had never performed such an operation in all his long years

in the Underhive, but he knew the principles of it.

The procedure had a near legendary status among the medical practitioners of the Underhive. The process was complicated but basically involved extracting, and then purifying, fluid from the brain of a subject. The resulting extract, once mixed with a cocktail of stims, could then be injected into the brain of another, giving the receiver the original subject's memories. It was rumoured that some uphive nobles utilised the process to relive the thrill of exciting, dangerous or even life-threatening experiences without ever leaving the safety of the Spire. Assuming that the operation was successful, the only side-effect of a brain drain for the subject was that it left them with large gaps in their memory. Those who injected the cerebral fluid of others into their own brains faced the prospect of a crippling addiction, culminating in a total lose of their own identity as the memories of others fractured their minds into a myriad split personalities.

'I'll need to test the equipment, of course,' Doc Haze said slyly, running a hand over the cold metal of the chair.

'No time for that,' replied Mune. 'Our "patient" will be here anytime now.'

As if on cue there was the sound of footsteps on the stairs and Doc Haze looked round. Pushing a bald, manacled ganger before him, a tall man, swathed in a long leather coat and wearing a wide-brimmed hat that hid his face in shadow, entered the crypt. At his hips were holstered two large stub guns and as the man moved Haze caught glimpses of the skull and crossbones bounty seals attached to the long tails of his coat.

'Creed,' he stated coldly.

'Hello again, Doc,' the bounty hunter replied in a downhive drawl, seeming just as pleased to see the Underhive surgeon as Haze was to see him. Grabbing hold of his manacled prisoner with a strong hand, Creed pushed the ganger to his knees in front of the Guilder agent. 'Here's your man, Mune.'

As the ganger looked up at Mune, Haze felt suddenly sick. He already knew this man and now he knew what Antrobus Vetch was after. Haze wanted to vomit.

'Ah, Sisken,' Mune addressed the ganger. 'How the mighty are fallen, the leader of the Network brought low before Gravalax Mune.'

Although his eyes were hidden by dark-tinted goggles it was obvious the ganger was glaring at Mune. 'I know what you want,' Sisken hissed, 'but I'll never tell you! You'll never get it out of me!'

'Never tell me?' Mune pondered. 'I'm quite sure of that but never get it out of you?' He turned his gaze towards the gothic contraption and the filthy scientist standing next to it. 'I wouldn't be so sure about that.' Sisken's face fell as he followed Mune's gaze and his already sallow complexion turned almost

completely white.

‘Strap him in.’

As the Delaque gang leader struggled and protested futilely, the two scummers removed Sisken’s manacles and the servitor bodyguards forced him into the operating chair. Doc Haze secured the last restraint around the ganger’s head.

‘Work quickly, doctor,’ Mune instructed Haze. ‘But remember - no mistakes!’

Muttering something unintelligible to himself under his breath, the surgeon set to work.

The bounty hunter looked on, his face an emotionless mask. As the doctor positioned the syringe at the base of his prisoner’s head Creed took a crumpled packet of smokes from a pocket. Putting a cheroot to his lips he began looking his lighter.

Haze looked up. ‘You know I don’t like people smoking when I’m operating.’

The bounty hunter shot him a dark look and, producing a gleaming lighter from another pocket, lit the cheroot.

‘Just get on with it!’ Mune snapped and the whirring of servos from one of the servitor’s prosthetic claws encouraged Haze to put aside all thoughts of hygiene and proceed without further complaint.

But all the while his mind was racing. He knew Sisken, leader of the Delaque gang of information-brokers called the Network. It was they who had sold him the information about Antrobus Vetch’s operation to bring an ork into Hive Primus for Lord Helmawr’s private zoo. And it had been Haze who had leaked the same information to the authorities, forcing Vetch to dump the illegal alien in the Underhive. Haze had planned to study the ork’s regenerative abilities so that he might apply them to his own surgical skills, making his services invaluable to any Underhive gang. And what could Antrobus Vetch want with the leader of the Network other than to find out who sold him out? Once Haze had carried out the brain drain on Sisken anyone injecting the man’s cerebral fluid would discover Doc Haze was the culprit Vetch was after and he would be as good as dead!

But how could he get out of the inevitable? If he botched the brain drain on purpose Mune would have him killed on the spot! And even if he could somehow dispose of Mune and all his bodyguards - not to mention Creed - Vetch would only send others to find out what happened. Whichever way he looked at it he was doomed! If only he had more time maybe he could tamper with the evidence but time was one thing he didn’t have. Then he noticed the small phial of lubricant sitting on the tray next to the reclining chair and a smile spread across his lips as he began to formulate a plan.

There was the sudden roar of gunfire and shattering glass from the chapel

above. Haze jumped, almost stabbing his patient with the syringe.

‘We’re under attack!’ Mune squealed.

Unholstering his two wide-calibre stub guns, Creed ran up and out of the crypt, taking the steps two at a time.

‘Now you’ll be sorry,’ Sisken hissed in a voice barely more than a sibilant whisper.

‘Go!’ Mune yelled at the two scummers who were now looking first at the Guilder agent and then at each other in agitated confusion. ‘The operation must be completed!’

At a nod from Mune one of the hulking servitors herded the reluctant scummers out of the crypt.

CREED SPINTED ACROSS the broken floor of the chapel as bullets and las-rounds impacted in the crumbling wall behind him. Ducking down beneath the glassless arch of one of the ruined chapel’s windows he took a deep breath, letting it out in a long, controlled exhalation as he readied himself. ‘Let’s go, girls,’ he muttered under his breath and then rose into a half-crouch, pointing his guns over the sill of the window.

Peering across the rubble-strewn plaza in front of the chapel, at first glance Creed picked out eight pale-skinned, bald-headed figures positioned behind the ruins of concrete walls thirty paces from him, although he suspected there were probably as many more hidden out of sight. Each of them wore a pale-brown leather coat, not unlike his own apart from the emblem of a sump snake on the lapels - the badge of House Delaque - and their eyes were protected by black-tinted goggles or implanted filter screens. They were armed with an assortment of autoguns, bolt pistols and las-weapons.

Another round of fire peppered Creed’s position but this time he replied with two shots of his own, fired off in quick succession. A large Delaque wielding an autogun, exposed in a breach in the barricade, fell backwards, blood already oozing from two bullet wounds in his chest. Easy target, Creed thought.

There was the chatter of autogun fire as the ganger’s trigger finger spasmed in his death-throes, cries of anger from the Delaques and a yelp of pain. Creed grinned to himself.

‘Come on, fellas,’ he muttered under his breath, ‘it’s no fun when you do it to yourselves!’

Then the bounty hunter was aware of the crunching of mosaic tiles under booted feet behind him and the scummers dashed into cover in the chapel, the threatening form of Mune’s servitor bodyguard behind them.

Another fusillade of shots smacked into the crumbling chapel. Creed rose onto his haunches, fired off another couple of dum dum rounds and another Delaque dropped, blood dribbling from a hole in his filter screen. The bounty hunter ducked back into cover as the rest of the besieging gangers replied to his attack with more las-blasts and bolter rounds.

The two scummers looked at him in awed amazement and Creed heard one of them gasp, 'He's good!'

He glowered at them as a searing las-round gouged its way through the sill of the window. 'When you ladies are quite ready,' he drawled, 'maybe you'd like to earn the right to keep your stinking hides?'

In embarrassment the hired scum fumbled the safeties off their autopistols and aimed haphazard fire at the Delaque gang, hitting almost everything but the gangers. Creed made up for their waste of ammunition, making each one of his shots count. One dum dum round clipped a man's shoulder, sending the Delaque's own raking auto-fire streaking towards the roof of the dome. A second round took out another ganger's kneecap, the screaming man dropping his pistol as he clamped his hands over the ragged wound and his leg gave way under him. A third hit the lasgun gripped by a snarling Delaque, his face a mess of scar tissue, ruining its firing mechanism and sending the weapon flying into the ruins.

The explosive bark of Creed's point six-six calibre stub guns and the wild rattling chatter of the scummers autopistols was joined by a chugging roar as the servitor, its metal feet planted squarely on the ground, opened fire with an autocannon attachment mounted on its grotesquely overlarge robotic right arm.

Under the watchful eyes of the Imperial eagle, the chapel's defenders did their best to repel the Delaques.

THE CONCUSSIVE FORCE of an explosion rocked the crypt. Doc Haze's sweat-slicked hand slipped on the handle of a control lever. 'No mistakes, remember?' his Guilder overseer screeched as he almost rammed the syringe needle deeper into the Delaque leader's brain, rather than removing it.

'I'm doing my best,' Haze snapped back, 'considering the circumstances!'

Gravalax Mune said nothing else, merely indicating the monstrous slave-machine standing next to him, with a flick of his head. Cursing under his breath, the doctor withdrew the syringe from the silent, semi-lobotomised Sicken and disconnected the phial containing the sample of cerebral fluid. Haze gripped the phial tightly in his hand, lest it slip from his sweaty palms. He wasn't only sweating because he was working in a war-zone - more than anything it was due to his increasing sense of anxiety at how he was going to avoid giving Antrobus

Vetch's agent the evidence that it was he who had scuppered his master's plans!

For a moment he actually considered dropping the glass container - he could make out it slipped from his grasp when the next explosion came from the chapel above - but he realised just as quickly that it would be futile. Mune would have him killed there and then, and ask questions later. He would have to think of another way out of this. And then it came to him.

'I just have to purify the sample,' Haze explained to the Guilder agent, 'then we'll be done.'

Placing his own body between Mune and the centrifuge device fixed to the back of the operating chair Haze erupted Sisken's brain sample into the purification chamber with one hand while he rummaged in the pocket of his grimy lab coat with the other.

WITH A WHOOSH of super-heated air a second fireball streaked through the chapel window and impacted against the huge Imperial eagle. 'Helmawr's rump!' Creed cursed as he felt the heat-wash on his skin. Someone's using a flamer, he thought. Looks like things could get a little hot!

For the first time in a long time Creed felt outgunned. His initial assault on the Network had used up the last of his grenades. All he had left now were his two stub guns, with a couple of dozen rounds in total, and as a last resort his bootknife. Time I paid a long overdue visit to Hackbut's Arms House, he considered, if I make it through this.

There were only three of them left defending the chapel. The taller of the two scum had stupidly stuck his head around the side of a pillar to assess the situation only to have it blown off by a bolter shell. The fat scummer had gone to pieces after that, being possessed by a palsy that made his poor aim even worse.

The Delaques seemed to have called up some reinforcements. Through the smoke Creed caught glimpses of a man with a shock of orange hair moving among the bald gangers. Hired gun, the bounty hunter mused. Probably the one with the flamer.

At that moment a third ball of fire hurtled through the open archway like a comet and slammed into the servitor. The blast threw the hulking slave-machine backwards into the chapel's altar. The heat of the fireball melted cable-bundles and ignited the ammunition packed into the breach of its autocannon attachment. The resulting explosion shredded the organic parts of the servitor and tore apart its bionic implants.

Creed looked across at the remaining scummer to see the fat man lying in a puddle of his own pooling blood. Several shells from the servitor's exploding

arm had hit him from behind. 'Friendly fire,' the bounty hunter muttered grimly to himself.

Two more shots took out two more gangers and emptied both stub guns. Ducking down again and pressing his back against the wall Creed reloaded both weapons with practised ease. He would have to make every round count: after this there weren't enough for another reload.

Taking a deep breath he flung himself sideways, rolling past the open doorway and taking out two Delaque juves who had been advancing while he reloaded. Back in cover he peered around the doorjamb and did a swift headcount.

'Well, girls,' he said, addressing his smoking guns. 'Three down and one to go in here. At least five of them still out there, along with the new hothead. My kind of odds!'

Creed brought down one Delaque after another while - compared to the crackshot gunslinger - all they seemed capable of was peppering the chapel walls with bolter shell impact craters.

And then Creed was suddenly aware of something else. The incessant gunfire had stopped. All he could hear was the crackling of the flames around him, the pinging of his own cooling stub guns and the sound of feet running away over the broken plaza. Cautiously the bounty hunter looked around the doorjamb to see the flapping coat tails of half a dozen Delaque gangers fleeing into the gloom of the wastezones beyond. But on the other side of the plaza the orange-haired man still moved between the fractured concrete walls, ignoring the fleeing gangers.

'Well, girls,' Creed said. 'One to go.'

With a scream like a discharging plasma cannon three fiery missiles crashed into the chapel. Creed was thrown to the ground by the force of the blasts and covered his head as he was showered with splinters of glass and burning shards of masonry.

'Looks like it's time for a change of plan,' the bounty hunter muttered, as the Imperial eagle burned.

DOC HAZE Poured the last drop of the scummer's brain drain sample into the centrifuge and with the practised sleight of hand of a sideshow con artist, slipped both phials into his pocket. At the flick of a switch the device started spinning. Yet another explosion shook the chamber, dust showering from cracks in the vaulted ceiling. 'How long?' Mune snapped.

'A couple of minutes,' Haze hazarded.

‘That’s about two minutes longer than you’ve got.’

Both the scientist and Guilder agent spun round on hearing Creed’s distinctive drawl behind them.

‘What do you mean?’ Mune demanded.

‘Work it out yourself,’ the bounty hunter snarled, pointing at the unconscious Sissen. ‘Your guest’s friends have come to rescue him back and they’ve got some help. It’s time we were out of here!’

‘But how?’ Doc Haze panicked, wringing his hands. ‘The only way out of here is the way you just came in!’

‘Oh, I don’t think so,’ Creed said, turning his piercing gaze on Mune. ‘I doubt Antrobus Vetch’s trained lashworm would have set all this up without including more than one escape route. Where is it?’ Creed said, spinning round and pointing a stub gun at the tattoo on Mune’s forehead.

Mune glanced towards his remaining bodyguard.

‘Don’t even think about it,’ Creed hissed. ‘I’ll put a bullet between your eyes if you so much as blink.’

Yet another explosion from above rocked the crypt and the roof shook as something heavy crashed down onto the floor of the chapel above.

‘First give me the sample,’ Mune said, reaching out a hand.

Doc Haze looked to the bounty hunter. ‘Do it,’ Creed said.

The surgeon halted the spinning centrifuge and removed the phial containing the partially “purified” extract. He tossed it to the Guilder who caught it with a grimace of annoyance.

‘Now we go,’ Creed stated, pulling back the hammer of the stub gun.

Saying nothing, Mune turned and moved swiftly towards a shadowy archway, previously hidden in the shadows of the far corner of the crypt. In a moment he was through it and gone, followed by the stomping servitor. The bounty hunter and the scientist crossed the crypt quickly towards the exit. When they were only metres away from the archway a ball of white-hot flame streaked over their heads, scorching the hairs on the back of Creed’s neck. The fireball smashed into the roof above the archway, sending lumps of smoking rubble crashing down in front of it.

Creed spun round. Standing at the foot of the steps was the orange-haired man he had seen with the besieging gangers. Creed saw that as well as a shock of orange hair, the man had a nasty scar running along the side of his head, from his right temple down to behind his ear under the hairline. He was wearing a pair of black leather boots that covered his legs up to the knees. As well as a grubby pair of rat-hide britches and an unwashed, sleeveless undershirt the man wore a black sleeveless jacket, that looked like it could have been crudely stitched

together from spider-skin and that left his muscular arms bare. His features were set in an expression of fury or pain - Creed couldn't tell which - and he advanced with his hands open without a weapon in sight.

Questions crowded Creed's mind. Why was a hired gun, who had previously been wielding a flamer to such devastating effect only moments before now standing in front of him unarmed? Why was the hired gun still here when those who had hired him had fled?

Creed felt a tug on his arm and looked round to see the crazed scientist quaking behind him, his expression imploring him to move.

'What are you so scared of?' Creed asked Haze angrily. 'He's one man and he's unarmed!'

'Because the good doctor recognises me,' the man said, a cruel smile playing over his grimacing features. 'You do recognise me, don't you, Doc?' the man stated. 'No, don't bother answering. I can tell from the look of ashen-faced panic that you do.'

'I don't believe I've had the pleasure,' Creed snarled, levelling both stubbers at the stranger.

'The name's Ignus Mander,' the man said and then winced. 'My quarrel's not with you, bounty hunter, but if you get in my way I will kill you.'

'And anyone who gets in the way of Nathan Creed has got a whole heap of trouble coming!' Creed retorted, starting to squeeze both triggers.

'Have it your way,' Mander replied coldly.

'Creed!' hissed Doc Haze who was still cowering behind the tall, imposing figure of the bounty hunter. 'Just shoot him and then we can get out of here!' Despite his desperation to leave the doctor seemed rooted to the spot.

Creed increased the pressure from his trigger fingers. Suddenly he gave a yelp of pain and let go of both guns. Creed looked down at the palms of his hands. Both were covered in large red weals and blistering skin, which stung like a milliasaur bite. Inexplicably, in a matter of seconds the metal of the stubbers had become white-hot, as if they had been heated in a furnace. Creed hugged his hands to his sides in an attempt to dull the pain.

'Now we run!' Haze shouted, pulling sharply on Creed's arm.

The burning pain still overwhelming his senses, forgetting his precious guns the bounty hunter allowed himself to be dragged away by the desperate doctor, who now seemed to have found the motivation to flee.

The two of them stumbled through the archway and into the passageway beyond, following Mune's escape route. Vetch's agent and his heavy-duty bodyguard were gone and neither Creed nor the doc knew which ripperjack's nest the tunnel would lead them into next. All they knew was that it would lead

them away from Ignus Mander and that was good enough for now.

As the two of them fled Creed heard Mander calling after them, 'You can run, Doc! You can run!' And run they did.

DOC HAZE WAS panting for air like a dying asthmatic, as he and Creed came to a halt behind a power relay station. The bounty hunter seemed to have recovered himself after the initial shock of Mander's attack but his hands were a mess of suppurating blisters. After gasping for air, doubled-up with his hands gripping his knees for a minute or two, he took a roll of bandage from a pocket and bound Creed's hands. 'How does it feel now?' Doc Haze asked.

'Like I washed my hands in a chem pool,' Creed grumbled, 'but I'll live. Look, we can't hang around here for long before this Mander catches up with us again, so when you're done let's get moving and maybe you can tell me exactly who you've skavved off this time!'

Doc Haze cast his mind back to the last time he had seen Ignus Mander and felt sick to the pit of his stomach.

'If I tell you the whole story, Creed, you must promise to protect me from him. The man's a lunatic! You must kill him! Help me now and I'll see you're well-rewarded.'

'Like last time?' the bounty hunter muttered sullenly.

'We came to an agreement.'

'Huh!' Creed grunted. 'It was the same after the Fester Hole incident.'

'I fixed your arm after your run-in with the Kaynn Clan Gang, didn't I?' the doc protested. 'This time I'll make it up to you. Any upgrade you want.' The doc faltered at these words as he considered what he was about to tell the bounty hunter. 'We'll think of something.'

Creed's face remained an inscrutable mask as he cast his eyes back over the area of wasteland they had crossed.

'All right, Doc,' he said at last. 'Although my better judgement tells me I'm a scawy's uncle for doing so, it looks like we're in this together now so it's in my best interests if I know as much about this scawer as possible if I've got to take him out.'

Quelling the sickening fear that gripped him, Doc Haze began to relate the whole sorry tale to his would-be protector. 'It was a couple of years ago. I tended to Mander after he was shot in a gunfight out at Steel Canyon. I pulled seven pieces of lead out of him but one remained: a bullet lodged in his brain. By rights it should have killed him, only it hadn't. I tried to remove it but something went wrong.'

Haze looked at Creed guiltily and saw at once that the bounty hunter's previously emotionless features were now contorted in a grimace of horror. 'How many times have you fixed me up, Doc?'

'It was a one-off. Honestly! To this day I still don't know what went wrong,' the doc gabbled. 'The more I picked at the bullet the further I ended up pushing it into his cerebellum. You know what some tech-biologists believe about that part of the brain?'

'No, Doc, but something tells me it's got something to do with how Mander made my girls give me the kiss-off.'

'It is popularly held in scientific circles that the cerebellum is the source of psychic powers.'

'Wyrds,' the bounty hunter said with a scowl.

'Exactly,' Haze confirmed. 'Only in some people these powers lie dormant in their subconscious. In most cases these powers never reveal themselves, but then in others some catalyst awakens these latent powers - the onset of adolescence, a sharp blow to the head'

'Having a bullet pushed into your brain by some lunatic surgeon!'

Haze looked away from Creed rubbing his hands together nervously.

'And how do these powers manifest themselves?' Creed pressed.

'Some psykers can control others by willpower alone, others can move objects physically with their minds and some can manipulate the molecules in objects or even the air around them to heat them to boiling or melting point.'

'So Mander's a pyro.'

'Looks like it.'

'How come Mander's never come after you before? I sure as hell would've done!' Creed said darkly.

'I was based down in Perdition back then. Once I'd patched Mander up as best I could and handed him back to his gang-friends heavily-sedated, Veral and I packed up and moved out. I suppose it was only a matter of time before he caught up with me.' Haze looked thoughtful for a moment. 'Thinking about it, once the Network got involved it was inevitable. Those information-junkies and their "Father" don't miss a trick, unfortunately! This way it looks like Mander got the chance to have his revenge and get paid for it at the same time.'

'Whatever,' the bounty hunter drawled. 'Let's face facts. Mander's going to catch up with us sooner or later, I haven't got my guns and that wasn't a flamer he was using during the assault on the chapel at all.'

'Sounds like a pretty concise summary of the situation.' Grimacing, Ignus Mander stepped out from behind the transformer station, fists clenched in front of him.

‘How long have you been standing there?’ Haze squealed.

‘Long enough,’ Mander said and winced again. ‘I think the only bit you missed out, Doc, was the fact that the bullet you left inside my head means I live in a state of perpetual agony that even drugs can’t suppress!’

‘I know the perfect cure for a headache,’ Creed snarled. ‘It’s just a shame I haven’t got my pain-killers with me.’

‘I’ve already told you once, you’re not my enemy,’ Mander said, addressing the bounty hunter, ‘but if you keep on like this you soon will be.’

‘We’ll see about that,’ Doc Haze retorted, displaying a little more bravado now he knew that Creed was fighting for him. ‘You’ll rue the day you came after Doc H aargghhh!’ the doc screamed, and doubled up in crippling, burning agony.

‘Doc?’ Creed half-whispered. ‘What are you doing to him?’ the bounty hunter demanded, turning back to Mander. The pyromaniac was staring intently at the doc and Creed was sure he could see wisps of flickering flame dancing around the psyker’s clenched fists. ‘Oh no you don’t,’ Creed hissed and charged at the wyrd.

Mander immediately turned his piercing gaze on the running bounty hunter. Creed was sure he could see distant fires, burning like cold stars within the pyro’s unblinking eyes. Creed faltered, feeling his whole body flush with heat, as if he had run five kilometres rather than five metres. He blinked as sweat ran into his eyes.

Putting a hand to the slick-wet skin of his forehead he wiped the sweat from above his eyes. His brow felt like it was burning up as his body temperature soared. It was as if he was suffering from the worst case of sewer-swamp fever ever recorded. He could feel his soaking undershirt clinging to his back. Then he realised that even his bandages were becoming damp as sweat ran down his arms. He began to feel dizzy as the unbearable heat threatened to overcome him.

Without his guns and in danger of becoming totally incapacitated as he was, Creed reacted instinctively. Turning, through sweat-blurred eyes Creed saw Doc Haze’s horrified face mere metres away. Forcing his legs to move, overheating muscles protesting bitterly, the bounty hunter staggered forward, bundling the panicking scientist in front of him. His head spinning, Creed saw the black ellipse of an open shaft ahead of them. As they closed the distance between themselves and the hole Creed heard the sound of running water growing ever louder over the pounding of his own heart. At the same moment the smell of scorched leather assaulted his nostrils.

Looking down at his coat as he ran, Creed could see smoke rising from the battered material. With a whoomph the flapping coat tails burst into flame. Without a moment’s hesitation the bounty hunter pulled the coat off and flung it

aside, losing his hat at the same time. Then the black gulf was before them and, shoving the doc ahead of him, Creed half jumped and half fell in the cold, enveloping darkness.

He hit the fast-flowing stream next to the dazed doc and a cloud of steam rose from the water around him. At once Creed could feel his body temperature dropping to a more healthy level. He sat up and let out a long sigh. Doc Haze was sitting stunned in the middle of the watercourse, the effluent stream, which glowed with faint phosphorescence, swirling past him.

‘I never want to feel like that again,’ Creed said, running a wet hand through his close-cropped greying hair.

Doc Haze looked at him for a moment, his mouth open in amazement.

‘How can you be so calm?’ he managed at last. ‘Mander just tried to make you spontaneously combust!’

‘Come on, doc,’ Creed said grimly, ignoring the scientist’s question. ‘We’ve got to keep moving. That bastard isn’t going to stop now until both of us look like the main course at a scavvy barbeque.’

The pipe was almost large enough to stand upright in. Following the flow of the polluted water downstream, crouching slightly, the bounty hunter and the scientist jogged into the gloom.

GRAVALAX MUNE STOOD in front of the heavy bulkhead door, dusting off his robes and tapping his foot impatiently, waiting for security clearance. The servitor stood statue-still behind him, no concept of “being kept waiting” or “impatience” within its programmed brain.

There was a sudden click followed by an electronic whirr and a port opened within an eye-socket of the Guilder skull badge that formed an integral part of the steel door. An optical probe, looking like an iron and glass eyeball, emerged from the hole on a telescopic armature. It stopped centimetres from Mune’s face. The Guilder agent glared at the probe. The probe whirred and clicked as its camera eye focused and then jerked back abruptly.

The artificial eye descended on its metal stalk so that it could scan the Guild badge hung around Mune’s neck. After a few seconds there was an electronic chirrup and the probe retracted back into the port, which closed behind it. Hinges groaning, with a hiss of compressed air the bulkhead door swung slowly open.

‘Access granted,’ the tinny voice said in a metallic monotone. Taking a deep breath Mune stepped through the doorway into Antrobus Vetch’s lair, the silent servitor clunking after him.

CAUTIOUSLY CREED PEERED over the edge of the pipe while the panting doc hung back. The pipe had twisted and turned, like so many other conduits between the domes of Hive Primus, until it came to an abrupt end in the side of another derelict dome. 'Well?' Haze shouted over the background roar. 'How far down is it?'

The phosphorescent liquid swirling around Creed's booted feet ran out of the end of the sluice pipe and fell several metres before joining the hundreds of gallons of muddy brown water pouring out of a much wider opening below them. The stench of hydrogen sulphide assailed Creed's nostrils as an endless stream of pollutants thundered into the effluent lake twenty metres below.

'Put it this way, doc, the fall won't kill you,' the bounty hunter said with no trace of humour in his voice. But whatever's in that lake might, he added to himself.

'Do you know where we are?'

'Yes. The local chem-prospectors call it the Bilgespill Drop, although you won't find many of them out here without gasmasks and protective suits because of the toxins constantly being pumped into the dome. The air-recyclers aren't that reliable down here.'

'So where do we go from here?'

Creed looked back along the shaft: 'Well, back that way is our friendly pyromaniac. So I guess our only real option is down.'

Clinging onto one side of the pipe's mouth, the bounty hunter leaned out over the end and scanned the surrounding area for another way down. A ripperjack's-swing away was a rusted ladder that descended to a grilled walkway that was sprayed by the waterfall. Creed pulled himself back into the pipe and looked the scientist up and down. 'Doesn't look good,' he sighed.

'Could we lower ourselves down?' Haze asked, obviously not relishing the prospect of jumping.

'You got a rope?'

The doc edged closer to the bounty hunter and dared a glance over the edge of the pipe. 'By the Spire!' he gasped.

'Doc!' Creed yelled over the deafening roar of the water. 'Can you swim?'

The bounty hunter was suddenly aware that he was heating up again. Wishing that his worst fears would prove unfounded he turned around slowly. Standing in mid-stream ten metres away, his grimace of pain and anger illuminated by the phosphorescence in the water, was Ignus Mander. As his body temperature began to rise it seemed to Creed that Mander's orange hair was aflame at the tips.

Mander relaxed his hands, the wisps of flame dissipated and the bounty

hunter was freed of the unbearable burning sensation that was gripping his body. 'Caught between a rock and a hard place,' the pyro taunted. 'Or should that be a drop and a hot place?'

Quickly, Creed weighed up the various options. He could try and take Mander now: he was sure he could beat him in a fistfight, despite the pyro's obvious upper body strength. But would he be able to reach Mander before he cooked him from the inside out?

'Do you know what it's like, Doc, living in constant pain?' Mander asked walking slowly towards them. 'A thousand white-hot needles lancing every nerve ending whenever you move?'

'It was an accident!'

'I suppose I should be grateful though,' Mander said, ignoring Haze's plea. 'If it wasn't for you I wouldn't be able to do this!'

The pyro's fists bunched. Creed and Doc Haze doubled up in agony as they were assaulted by a blast of pyro-kinetic energy.

Nothing else for it, the bounty hunter decided as his head began to swim. Gritting his teeth against the building pain Creed threw himself bodily out of the end of the pipe grabbing the doc by the collar of his lab coat as he did so. Then there was nothing but air beneath them. Semi-conscious from Mander's assault the two men dropped like stones, only dimly aware of the rotten egg stink of the torrent of the effluent waterfall buffeting them until with a tremendous splash they hit the roiling surface of the lake below. Oily waters closed over them and they sank into the murky grey depths.

NATHAN CREED OPENED his eyes, which immediately started to sting in the polluted waters. Freed from the agony of his own body overheating by the enveloping waters of the lake Creed's natural survival instinct took over. From the light of glowglobes above permeating the turbid waters he could see the doc only a matter of metres away, dragging himself towards the surface of the lake with unpractised strokes. Not many inhabitants of the Underhive could swim at all - there weren't many bodies of water this close to Hive Bottom that were safe to swim in, for one reason or another - but from Creed's long years of experience in the badzones he would have drowned long ago if he hadn't been able to swim.

The two men clambered out of the stinking green pool and began the unpleasant task of cleaning themselves off. Doc Haze wiped a mass of sludgy suds from the metal dome of his head and then, grimacing, doubled up as he vomited polluted water from his protesting stomach.

'You don't want to swallow too much of that stuff, Doc,' Creed said, trying to

remove glistening jelly-slime from his numbed right arm.

‘I didn’t intend to,’ Haze coughed before retching again.

‘We can’t hang around here,’ the bounty hunter said, matter-of-factly. ‘Mander will find a way down sooner or later.’

Creed was suddenly overwhelmed by unfamiliar emotions. Here was an opponent who would not stop, driven by pain and hatred to exact his vengeance no matter what. Creed had never been in such a situation before and he didn’t like it. For the first time in his life in the Underhive he felt utterly helpless.

The bounty hunter looked out across the broken landscape of the dome.

Or perhaps I’m not so helpless after all.

In the distance, glowing chlorine-green gas vented into the toxic atmosphere of the dome and amongst the others acrid smells assailing his nose Creed could pick out the distinctive reek of methane. They were standing at the edge of a gas-geyser field: pockets of flammable gas produced by various industrial processes and life-support systems elsewhere in the Hive collected here, issuing forth in blasts at regular intervals when the pressure became too great. Creed smiled. It was time to use this inhospitable terrain to his advantage.

Haze spat the last of the muck from his mouth: ‘Where do we go from here?’

‘That way,’ Creed said, pointing with his left arm towards the cracked plain and the venting gas-geysers.

‘WHERE ARE YOU going to run now, Mr bounty hunter?’ Ignus Mander asked, his tone derisive. The bounty hunter stood only a metre away from the edge of a precipice that ran a hundred metres in either direction. Doc Haze was slumped against a rockrete boulder close by, coughing violently. It looked like the doc hadn’t got long to go in this toxic environment. Mander had the two of them cornered at last. There was no more running for them now, not unless they wanted to save Mander the trouble of killing them - but where would be the satisfaction in that?

The bounty hunter looked a mess, his close-cropped greying hair wet with oily water, his undershirt stained brown by slime and effluent, his right arm hanging uselessly at his side, covered in angry red weals, and grubby bandages, oozing pus, wrapped around both hands. The doc had called him Creed, Mander considered.

‘So, which one of you shall I kill first?’ Despite the white-hot needles lancing his brain, Mander savoured the moment, looking first to Creed, then to the doc, then back to

The bounty hunter sprang forward, rapidly closing the distance between them.

The pyro hit him with a bolt of energy but in his arrogant complacency he had given the man the time he needed.

Creed bowled into Mander, and sent them both sprawling in the carbon-black dust. Instinctively, Mander threw out his hands to break his fall and his psyker power was broken.

‘Not so tough now, are you?’ the bounty hunter spat, wrestling Mander to the ground by the shoulders.

‘We’ll see about that,’ Mander retorted and brought his knee up into Creed’s stomach. The bounty hunter doubled up, winded, and Mander pushed his opponent away. Faster than any ordinary man, the grizzled gunslinger was up and at him again, each punch he landed like the pounding of a sledgehammer. Mander retaliated, his muscles bunched.

The two men traded blows, marking each other hit for hit. Creed was determined to keep Mander occupied with his fists so that he wouldn’t have the opportunity to use his pyro-kinetic powers. However, despite the bounty hunter’s resilience, it was obvious that Creed had been weakened by the hunt.

Slowly but surely, Mander was winning. Finally, in a skilfully executed move, the pyro kicked Creed’s legs out from under him and as his knees buckled, delivered a double-handed blow to his chin. The bounty hunter collapsed into the dirt, his sides heaving as he gasped for air in the polluted atmosphere.

Mander clenched his fists, ready to deliver a killing blast of pyro-kinetic energy. ‘Well, do you have anything to say before I roast you like a spitted swine?’

‘Yes,’ Creed said, spitting a mouthful of ash from his bleeding mouth. ‘Can a condemned man have one last smoke? You’ve won, Mander, so let me die with good, honest tobacco smoke tarring my lungs.’

Flushed with exhilaration, having won the fight, Mander felt the magnanimity of the victorious. He was even almost able to forget about the continual splitting headache he lived with every minute of his life. ‘Why not?’

With his left hand Creed pulled a sodden, crumpled packet of cheroots from a pocket in his britches.

‘They’re a bit wet,’ he said, almost apologetically.

‘Not a problem,’ Mander replied.

The pyro leant over the stricken man, bringing his hand close to the tip of the soaking cheroot Creed placed between his lips. With a flick of Mander’s fingers the end of the cheroot sizzled into glowing life, the tightly wrapped tobacco drying in seconds.

‘Thanks,’ Creed said, ‘idiot!’

Complacency had been his enemy again. Mander hadn’t seen Creed clasp the

piece of broken pipe in his strengthening right hand. The improvised maul connected with the side of Mander's head with a crack. The blow sent him reeling. Suddenly unable to maintain his balance, or to use his legs properly, Mander collapsed heavily over of a small rent in the ground.

His head ached but, it slowly dawned on him, not with the lancing needle-pain of the bullet lodged in his brain. This was a dull throbbing ache at the side of his head that blurred his vision. My skull's probably fractured, he thought, almost happily, but the bullet's been dislodged, maybe only slightly, but no more constant agony!

In the same instant Mander realised - without having to test the fact - that his powers were gone along with the agonising pain.

His eyes swimming in and out of focus, the stunned Mander looked towards the figure of Creed advancing towards him. The bounty hunter still gripped the rusted iron pipe in one bandaged hand and the now-lit cheroot was held between the thumb and forefinger of the other. There was a hiss of gas escaping under pressure and Creed was silhouetted against a glowing green jetting cloud. Moving his head slightly Mander could see other cracks in the floor of the dome and, with his ear pressed to the ground, he could hear the rumble of erupting gas pockets.

Released of the pain he had lived with ever since Doc Haze botched the operation to remove the bullet from his brain, Mander was suddenly filled with a moment of clarity: Creed had lured him right into the midst of the gas geysers.

Mander was caught in a sudden blast of gas, with the force of a compressed-air hose, as the geyser he was sprawled across vented. Through the distortion in the air around him and his own blurred vision he saw Creed flick the cheroot, saw it tumble end over end towards him and then there was nothing but an acetylene white flare and the heat of a smelting furnace swept over him.

ANTROBUS VETCH SAT perched as regally as he could manage on his throne-like chair and fixed Gravalax Mune with a hungry stare. 'So, you have it,' the Guilder acknowledged, looking to his agent's open hand and the prepared syringe resting within it.

'Yes, my lord,' Mune simpered. 'The sample has been purified and is ready for insertion.'

'Excellent, excellent!' Vetch was almost giggling in excited anticipation. 'Well then, what are we waiting for, hmm? Give the syringe to Three-Six-Four.' Mune placed the syringe within the proffered pallid hand of the waiting servitor. 'Then close your eyes.'

Mune felt his erstwhile bodyguard's metallic claw clamp down hard on his shoulder. 'My lord?'

'I'm told it's easier to make sense of the newly-implanted memories if you block other sensory input.'

A cold chill passed down Mune's spine and sweat beaded on his forehead.

'There's also a period of disorientation but that isn't supposed to last for long.'

'But, my lord!' the panicking agent spluttered.

'You didn't think I'd inject the sample into myself, did you, hmm?' Vetch snapped, cutting off Mune's imminent protest. 'There could be anything in that syringe! And anyway, have you not heard the expression, why have a pit slave and dig yourself? Now we'll find out who was responsible for fouling up the biggest operation we've ever set-up!'

The excitedly leering Vetch nodded to the slave-machine holding Mune. The man felt a sudden stab of pain in the base of his skull that made him gasp and then the plunger was depressed.

Mune's mind was suddenly filled with a torrent of images as the fluid from Sisken's brain and the lubricant were injected directly into his brain. Mune's retinas burned and he screwed his eyes tight shut in an attempt to stop the stinging sensation. One after another the memories poured through his cerebral cortex.

He was standing before an accident cogitator engine in a red lit chamber listening to the instructions of "Father". He was drinking in Snake Eye Sam's gambling den. He was in the centre of a wire-fenced compound when suddenly everything went white. He was standing before himself, Gravalax Mune, and was listening to his own voice telling him to bring Doctor Isaiah Haze to him. He was half-conscious being carried over a man's back - a man who wore a long leather coat.

The images continued. Gradually his scrambled consciousness began to make sense of the rush of memories. He "remembered" being in Snake Eye Sam's. He "remembered" assisting in planning the operation that would bring an ork into Hive Primus for Lord Helmawr's zoo. He "remembered" speaking with Doc Haze

And at last Mune came to a terrible conclusion.

'Well?' he heard Antrobus Vetch's reedy whine as if he were a long way away. 'Who sabotaged the operation, hmm?'

Mune began to speak, neurotransmitters racing at the influx of serotonin, unable to censor what he was saying. 'I I It was me,' he spluttered, saliva dribbling from the corner of his mouth. 'I betrayed you!'

‘GOING SOMEWHERE, DOC?’ Haze spun round, his heart pounding. Standing in the wrecked doorway of the scientist’s ransacked lab was Nathan Creed. He looked more like his old self compared to the last time Haze had seen him. He had recovered his hat and coat, although the later was rather singed around the edges, and the bounty hunter’s stub guns hung holstered at his waist. His undershirt, however, was still almost black with grime and he had acquired some gloves from somewhere to protect his scolded hands.

‘Much as I’d like to make idle chit-chat I have to pack!’ Haze growled, scooping the contents of an instrument drawer into a large bag. The doc’s servitor, One-Eight-Seven, was already holding two full packs.

‘Why?’ Creed drawled, taking a long drag on a smouldering cheroot.

‘Because, in case you hadn’t worked it out yet, Antrobus Vetch now knows that it was me who sabotaged his ork-smuggling operation, and any minute now a whole host of pit slaves and hired scum are going to descend on this place so that that vindictive bastard-son-of-a-ripperjack can extract more than his pound of flesh! That’s why!’

‘Oh, I don’t think that’s very likely,’ the bounty hunter said, still smiling. ‘Not since Vetch thinks that it was actually Mune who betrayed him.’

‘What?’

‘Our mutual friend Gravalax Mune is at this moment being prepared for “reassignment” to Stalag Slag Hole.’

Doc Haze strode over to the bounty hunter and clasped his shoulders, giving him a friendly shake. ‘Then I’m free! I don’t need to leave! I owe you one, Creed. You saved my life from than maniac Mander and now I’m free to live it out in peace!’

‘Until the next time,’ Creed muttered, ‘and you actually owe me two.’

‘Two?’ Haze let go of his saviour and took a step back, eyeing the downhive desperado suspiciously. ‘What do you mean, two?’

‘I know why Vetch thinks it was Mune who betrayed him. I saw you mix the brain fluid with the lubricant when I entered the crypt the second time. I’m sure Vetch would like you to explain it all to him, as well as who really sabotaged the ork smuggling operation. I always suspected it was you, doc.’

Haze felt the blood drain from his cheeks. ‘So, what do you want in return, Creed?’ he asked sourly.

The bounty hunter took another long drag on his cheroot and exhaled a great cloud of blue-grey smoke. ‘I’ll let you know,’ he said and, tipping his hat to Haze, Nathan Creed turned and strode out of the lab.

And as the bounty hunter left, Haze was sure he could hear him laughing.

