



# MAMA'S BOYS

Jonathan Green

WITH THE SPANG of metal on metal a bullet ricocheted off the girder next to the bounty hunter's head. Pushing his battered, wide-brimmed hat firmly onto his head, Nathan Creed sprinted for the shelter of a pile of crates, a large-muzzled stub gun in each hand. A trail of fire chased him across the warehouse wall as one hot shot charge after another blasted from the shotgun in the Scavvy's hands. Still two metres from the safety of the fungus-wood crates Creed flung himself forward. He landed in a roll as a round exploded against the wall at the spot where a split-second before his head had been. The tails of his long, leather coat flapping about him, the bounty hunter came to a halt in a crouch, the cluster of skull and crossbones bounty seals, attesting to successfully collected bounties, glittering in the globe-light of the killer's warehouse hideout.

Where did the Ripperjack-loving scavver get hot shot ammunition from? Creed wondered. Probably his last unfortunate victim, after he'd skinned and eaten him!

From his hiding place, Creed peered through the gap between two containers. He could just make out the scavvy's pockmarked face peering over the top of an oil-drum at the back of his camp. In front of the oil-drum lay all that remained of the murdering cannibal's last victim. Creed had interrupted the scavvy serial killer as he was in the process of skinning the last hired gun who had come looking for him.

Now Creed was caught in a shoot-out with Django Kaynn, youngest of the Kaynn Clan Gang and vicious as a milliasaur on slaughter, in the middle of the abandoned warehouse dome where the scavvy had made his lair. A network of rusted air-conditioning ducts and pipes were suspended from the warehouse ceiling by rusted chains. From a number of these Django Kaynn had displayed his curing trophies. In all the scavvy had killed, skinned and eaten sixteen men, women and children, and those were only the ones the Guilders knew about. Crouched behind the crates, reloading his guns by touch alone without looking at what he was doing, Creed counted at least five skins more than there should have been.

Django Kaynn, you sure are one sick son-of-a-sumpsucker, Creed thought as he slammed home the last dum-dum round into the chamber.

‘Well, girls,’ the bounty hunter said quietly in his distinctive Underhive drawl, addressing the guns he held in his hands, ‘we’re not going to get him while he’s holed-up tighter than a lashworm in a bore hole.’

The problem was that, while the scavvy cannibal was trying to kill the bounty hunter, and no doubt eat him, Creed needed Django Kaynn alive. He looked up at the tangle of pipework above him again. But there’s always a way, he thought.

‘Django Kaynn,’ Creed called out, ‘I’m taking you in!’

‘Yeah?’ came a high-pitched snarl of a voice from the other side of the building. ‘Yous an’ whose watchmen bounty-man?’

‘Just me and my girls!’ the bounty hunter replied, jumping to his feet and letting fire with both barrels at his target.

In a shower of sparks, the rusted chains holding up one end of an old pipe shattered. The heavy metal tube swung downwards and over the top of the oil-drum, smashing into the scavvy’s head and sending him flying.

With calm, measured steps, Nathan Creed strode over to where the killer’s prone body lay among the debris of the firefight, blood running from a jagged gash on his forehead. Django had let go of the stub gun when the pipe had hit him and it was now lost among the barrels and boxes. Having checked for any hidden weapons and cuffed the scavvy, only then did the bounty hunter check for a pulse. It was there, strong as his own.

Good, only knocked out, Creed noted. Holstering his stub guns and hauling the dead weight of the unconscious scavvy over his shoulder the bounty hunter left the warehouse lair.

\* \* \*

DJANGO KAYNN OPENED his eyes. He blinked a few times, in an attempt to clear his blurred vision, and tried to sit up. He immediately regretted the decision as grey stars flashed inside his aching head. He lay back again, moaning and screwed his eyes shut. It felt as if a pile driver had been pounded against his skull. Cautiously, and without opening his eyes, he felt for the egg-sized swelling he must have on his forehead. Sure enough, there it was. He moaned miserably again.

‘You’re awake then,’ drawled a voice that was little more than a husky whisper.

Django tried to sit up again and this time succeeded, despite more black

supernovae exploding within his brain. He was sitting in a cell, which was in fact part of a larger room divided in two by thick iron bars. On his side of the barrier were a plain pallet bed and a slop bucket. A small, square, grilled window shed fractured globe-light into the lock-up. Beyond the bars there was another bed, although this one had a thin mattress, a table and chair. The keys to the cell door hung from a hook on the wall, well out of reach.

Leaning against the jamb of the open doorway, one booted heel resting on the peeling frame, was a tall man, wearing a long leather coat and a battered hat. Striking a match against the doorframe, the man lit the cheroot in his mouth and took a long drag on the cigar. As the blue smoke escaped from his nostrils the man fixed Django with a steely gaze from under the shadowy brim of his hat.

‘Wheres am I?’ the degenerate cannibal demanded.

‘Where’s it look like?’ the figure at the door answered bluntly. ‘But if you mean which town - Sulphur Creek. You might have heard of it. You killed eight of its citizens including the entire Lanzo family, you murdering sewer snake!’

Slowly Django’s memory re-engaged and he pieced together the events that had brought him here and the person responsible for his present predicament - the bounty hunter!

‘You gonna be sorry you didn’t kill me when yous had the chance, dead man!’ the scavvy threatened. ‘I gonna bite out yer spleen and feed it to ya!’

The bounty hunter grinned, gesturing at the iron bars and firmly locked cell door. ‘I don’t think so,’ he said quietly.

‘Whys did you take me in alive, gun-boy?’ Django asked, genuine curiosity provoking his question.

The bounty hunter took a yellowing piece of parchment from inside his coat and, carefully unfolding it, read it out loud. ‘Django Kaynn, scavvy Outlaw. Wanted alive for murder and cannibalism. Bounty 50 credits.’ The man re-folded the poster and stowed it away in the folds of his long coat. ‘If you were dead, I wouldn’t get paid. It’s that simple.’

‘Well,’ spluttered the scavvy, trying to recover some of his earlier bravado, ‘you realise that when my brothers hear ‘bout this you is spider-food? They’ll come for you, bounty-man!’

Pushing the brim of his hat up with the barrel of a stub gun the bounty hunter replied coolly, ‘I’m counting on it.’

\* \* \*

A METHANE GREEN MIST hung over the Sumpscum Acid Marshes, a smothering blanket of toxic gas and airborne pathogens. A hundred square kilometres of polluted waterways, festering fungus beds and briars of rampant wire weed, the industrial marshland wound among the ruinous domes of Hive Bottom eighty metres below Mercury Falls and ten kilometres below the gleaming spires of Imperial House Helmawr. In fact, the closest the nobility of the Spire ever got to this Emperor-forsaken place was in the snakeskin bracelets they wore, encrusted with crystalline spider eyes: both species flourished in the effluent-charged Acid Marshes.

Nathan Creed gazed out over the rooftops of the shanty houses, from the higher ground on which the lock-up stood, and through the gloom towards the ammonia-reeking swamps. Wreathed in choking, sulphurous fumes, with the small barely habitable settlement of Sulphur Creek at its easternmost point, the Sumpscum Acid Marshes were home to sludge jellies, milliasaurs and worse. Much worse.

Everyone from Toxic Sump to Cable Pass had heard of the Kaynn Clan Gang. More degenerate a 'family' of scavvies you couldn't hope to meet this side of the Effluous River. Ruled over by the matriarchal, homicidal Mama Kaynn, the scavvy gang had their hideout deep in the Sumpscum. Only the Kaynn Clan was twisted enough to claim the marshes as their territory. In fact they were probably the only ones mutated enough to be able to survive in such a toxic environment in the first place.

So horrible and notorious were their crimes that the Kaynn Clan had become a nightmare fairytale parents used to naughty children to behave: 'If you do that one more time, Mama Kaynn will come for you!' Scavvies, mutants and scabies made up the Kaynn Clan and their loyalty to each other and Mama Kaynn was unswerving. All of them were killers. They killed for food, they killed for fun and they all loved their dear old 'mum'. Creed didn't want to even contemplate what Mama Kaynn must have got up to, out there in the swamps, to produce such a brood of degenerate mutants.

The citizens of Sulphur Creek knew the Kaynn Clan all too well. Eking out a living by extracting industrial strength acids and hydro-carbons from the marshes, which were then sold on Uphive, the citizens of the small settlement had come to an agreement with the Kaynn Clan long ago. If they kept out of the swamp and made their regular payment of flesh the scavvy gang would hopefully leave them alone in return and prey on some other poor unfortunates.

So what if from time to time a chem prospector went missing or a foolish child strayed into the effluent bogs, never to be seen again? If a man was lucky, he could make his fortune, in Sulphur Creek. From time to time the extraction

process would reveal traces of a rich mineral deposit in the swamp. The precious minerals could then be filtered out and refined. The profit from such a lucky strike was enough to buy a man out of Sulphur Creek - sometimes out of the Underhive itself. Stories of those who had succeeded before were enough to keep the poor and desperate who remained behind risking everything, their lives especially, on the off chance that they might make their fortune. It was greed and the promise of easy money that kept people in this stinking chem pit, pure and simple. Besides, Sulphur Creek was untroubled by interfering and expensive watchmen or Underhive gangs vying for possession of the petroleum processing stills. And, as many an old timer was heard to say when there was yet another disappearance, 'Worse things happen Uphive!'

But the Guilders didn't see it that way. Mass murder and extortion weren't good for trade, not unless they were implemented by the Merchant's Guild itself, in which case they were viable tools to encourage greater demand and profitability.

Many had tried to bring Mama Kaynn's gang in before but they had all gone about it the wrong way. Nathan Creed smiled to himself, lit another cheroot and waited.

\* \* \*

THE MUTANT SLIPPED along the oily waterways as if he had been born to it, which indeed he had. Viper-toads plopped into the black pools at his approach and fen snakes darted away from the ripples created in his wake. It could have only been natural instinct that told them to avoid the reptilian creature, in case they end up as a snack, but instinct was right. However, on this occasion Tuntan Kaynn was hunting other prey.

With only his limpid, ophidian eyes and the top of his grey scaly head visible above the surface of the water, the mutant glided along the maze of flooded channels, propelled by infrequent flicks of his salamander tail. Nitro beetles sung in the green gloom while rust mites skittered over the red-flecked stump of a corroded pipe protruding from a clump of purple-blue fronds. A chorus of croaks and strange chittering cries rose from the swamp as the creature passed.

Tuntan paused and blinked slowly. In the distance ahead through the reeds, he could see the lights of Sulphur Creek flickering like marsh-lights over the stagnant pools of the Sumpscum. The mutant hissed angrily. That was where the cursed bounty hunter held his 'brother' captive like a caged rat, or so the old trader had told them. He'd had no reason to doubt the man: what was the

point in lying when half your intestines lay on the ground in front of you?

The glow-globes dotted across the roof of the dome had faded as Hive Primus entered its night-cycle. It made no difference to Tuntan: the Acid Marshes lay under a permanent pall of darkness that varied between an all-pervading gloom to a total absence of any light at all, other than the tiny glowing tail-tips of the phosphorflies.

The half-scaly crossbreed pulled itself out onto the bank of the rivulet and on webbed feet padded almost silently towards the shantytown. With the proportions of a man and the added bulk and rough hide of the Necromundan sub-species known as scaly, Tuntan Kaynn made an imposing figure as he crept through the night, but there was no one to see him. The inhabitants of Sulphur Creek knew better than to leave the safety of their homes during the hours of darkness.

Nearing the houses he reached for the axe, strapped to his ridged back with ripperjack leather bands, with his right hand. A boneless tentacle writhed in place of a left arm. This in no way debilitated the mutant though. With the sinuous tentacle alone he could squeeze the life from a man.

Rounding a corner the mutant froze, his breathing almost imperceptible as he surveyed the scene at the end of the alleyway. The street rose towards the square on top of the rise in the middle of the settlement. At its edge stood the small white building of the town lock-up. The door stood open and through the gloom Tuntan could make out a long-coated figure sitting on a chair in the opening. The man wore a wide-brimmed hat that hid his face. The angle of the hat suggested to Tuntan that the man was asleep, his chin resting on his chest.

Cold blood boiled at the thought of his little brother, Django, languishing inside the lock-up for the last five days. But Tuntan didn't let his anger overwhelm his natural cunning. His swamp-dweller appearance belied a malign intelligence: Tuntan was no brainless plague zombie. Even if the bounty hunter was asleep at his post, and even if he could cover the ground between them as quietly as a shreel-shrew, he didn't want to risk giving the hired gun any warning of his approach. After all, he must have been good to bring in Django the cannibal in the first place.

Stealthily the mutant made his way between the buildings of the settlement until he could approach the bounty hunter's sentry post from behind. Pressed against the back wall of the jail he couldn't hear a sound coming from inside, either from his brother or his captor. Slipping around the side of the lock-up, in the same fluid motion Tuntan hurled the throwing axe through the open doorway. With a splintering crack the axe struck the back of the chair. In a moment of dreadful realisation the mutant clearly saw the long leather coat

draped over the back of the chair, the folds of its tails positioned in front of the chair legs and the empty, knee-length boots behind. The hat, balanced on top, completed the illusion.

And in the gloom at the back of the jailhouse, in a sleeveless undershirt and tanned britches, his stubble almost as long as the close-cropped greying hair on his head, crouched the bounty hunter. Standing stock-still in the open . and unarmed, with unblinking eyes Tuntan Kaynn looked into the barrels of two primed stub guns.

The tentacled mutant took the first two rounds in the chest and staggered back at their impact. A normal man would have been killed outright by such a shot but Tuntan's scaly heritage served him well. However, the bounty hunter had started with two fully loaded weapons and didn't intend to stop there. The third bullet hit him in the shoulder, spinning him round, as a fourth blasted a hole in his side.

The bounty hunter rose from his crouched position and, kicking the chair aside, strode out of the lock-up, muscles tensed against the explosive recoil of the handguns, as he fired round after round into the scavvy ganger.

Tuntan collapsed against the onslaught. Sprawled in the dust, the ground turning green with his blood, the mutant fixed the square-jawed bounty hunter with his yellow, snake-like eyes. His mouth opened and a forked tongue flicked between the thin, grey lips. He tried to speak. He wanted to tell his killer that he too was a dead man, that it was only a matter of time before the rest of the Kaynn Clan caught up with him, but all that came with his final breath was a dying hiss.

The creature's saucer eyes glazed over and his sluggish, cold blood came to a standstill in his veins. Tuntan Kaynn was dead.

\* \* \*

Nathan Creed marched back in to the jailhouse and grinned at the gagged and bound form of Django Kaynn, cowering in the corner of his cell.

'It's amazing how long you can stay awake for with regular doses of a little Spur,' he said.

Righting the chair the bounty hunter lifted his coat from it and put it on. Picking up his hat he gave it a quick dusting down before placing it firmly back on his head.

'It seems you were right,' he said, addressing Django again. 'The invitation has been sent out, we know they're coming, so now the party can really begin. Eh, girls?' he added with a nod to the smoking stubbers holstered at his waist.

\* \* \*

The fungus-wood raft came to rest against an outcrop of firmer ground at the easternmost edge of the swamp and the motley party disembarked. Swathed in mouldering rags, caked with filth and carrying primitive weapons, it was immediately apparent to an observer that these were scavvies. The devolved dregs of humanity that had become so mutated by the toxic environments they lived in, far from the settlements of the rest of the populace of Necromunda's Underhive, that the term 'human' no longer applied to them.

There were four of them altogether. A large brute of a man, for want of a better description, led the way towards the cluster of buildings huddled together where the ground rose steeply domewards. A collection of rotting, rickety jetties formed a wharf around the sulphurous yellow channel that gave the settlement its name.

The large man stopped and the mangy dog at his heels growled from one of its throats, the other head sniffing the air. Such genetic aberrations were not uncommon in the really badly contaminated domes this close to Hive Bottom. Behind the scavvy the others came to a halt: a stalking figure shrouded in a flea-ridden rat's skin; a short creature whose rags covered him completely, apart from his withered, boil-covered hands; a wild-haired, semi-naked man with a cord threaded with finger bones rattling around his neck.

A large, rainbow-winged phosphorfly hummed over their heads. The short, robed scavvy watched the insect with glowing coal eyes from inside its cowl for a moment. A long, sticky tongue suddenly darted out of the hood, snaring the phosphorfly on its tip before being retracted inside the cowl. A wet crunching sound followed.

'Don't spoil yer appetite, Buboe,' the leader of the party said, his speech slurred by the twisted lips of his malformed mouth. 'Mama's gonna be cooking up a feast tonight.'

'When's Gator gonna get 'ere?' asked the Ratskin.

'Big brother's on 'is way,' the large brute answered. 'Don't you worry.'

'But he's gonna miss all the fun,' said the wild-haired scavvy, hopping from one foot to the other.

'Why's that then?' asked Buboe, picking a piece of phosphorfly wing from between its teeth.

'Cos we're gonna get that sumpsucker first and make broth from his brains. Oh yes we are!'

'Okay, split up,' their leader commanded. 'First one ta get 'im gets first pick of the juicy bits.'

The scavvy band broke up but all eventually heading for the settlement from different directions. The two-headed mutant hound remained where it was, scratching in the dirt for some buried morsel that only it could smell. Its master turned back and snorted barked angrily in annoyance: ‘Ripper! Heel!’

CREEPING SPIDER MADE his way silently along the back street, a blunderbuss clutched in his hands. He could move with the stealth of his hive-born arachnid namesake. He knew how to walk through a giant spider’s web without triggering the vibration sensitive trigger thread. There wasn’t a better scout or tracker this side of Fester Hole. ‘Half-ratskin but all stealth,’ was how he liked to describe himself.

Creeping Spider froze, feeling the hard muzzle pressed against the small of his back.

‘You looking for me?’ came a slow drawl, little more than a whisper.

Sweat beaded on Creeping Spider’s forehead and trickled into his eyes. He blinked several times to clear the salty moisture from his vision. The ratskin was starting to panic.

‘Y-you wouldn’t shoot a man in the back, w-would you?’ he asked, and held his breath as he waited for a response.

‘Nope, that I wouldn’t,’ came the reply.

Creeping Spider let out the air in his lungs in a huge sigh of relief. If the game were up he’d rather spend the rest of his time in a Guilder jail than dying in the street filled with enough lead to drop a Scaly.

‘So turn around.’

‘Wha-?’ Creeping Spider felt a strong hand on his shoulder yank him backwards as a boot planted firmly on his backside pushed him forward. His body spun round.

He stumbled backwards, trying to keep his balance. Before he could bring his blunderbuss to bear Creeping Spider was dropped by a single gunshot to the forehead.

\* \* \*

Buboe Kaynn halted. The shot had come from somewhere over to his right. Cautiously he changed direction, making his way between the derelict warehouses around the wharf towards the centre of Sulphur Creek. The diesel stink of the swamp was strong here. An ammonia fog was rising from the Sumpscum Acid Marshes, the result of a chemical reaction that regularly

occurred after a day's fuel-extraction carried out by the townsfolk. Tendrils of toxic green mist snaked around the stilts of the wharf buildings and oozed along the streets. The chemical stench would mask his own somewhat pungent odour as he closed in on the bounty hunter.

Sulphur Creek was like a ghost town. The locals were all too well aware of the current situation and the whole heap of trouble the stranger had brought on himself. They knew the swamp-folk better than any outlands bounty hunter. They knew not to upset the Kaynn Clan and if the Kaynn Clan was on the warpath, they knew not to get in the way. At the first sign of trouble the entire populace had retreated to their hovels. The out-of-town bounty hunter and self-styled watchman could fight his own battles and in the ensuing fight they knew who their money was on. The town butcher, who doubled as the town undertaker, had already taken Creed's measurements.

Hearing a crunch behind him Buboe Kaynn spun round in time to catch sight of a shadowy form disappear among the gantries and chemical reclamation tanks on the raised piers of the wharf. Reaching into a bag at his waist the diseased scavvy pulled out a small, taped up flask and tested its weight in his hand. He had collected the industrial waste for his latest batch of tox bombs from the outlet pipe of an old reactor whose core had melted down years ago. The virulent poison had made even his weeping sores itch but the first test he had carried out on a giant hive rat had produced results better than he could have hoped for.

And then he saw his prey, or at least his shadow. Although the bounty hunter was hidden around the corner of a still shed, a glow globe somewhere behind him cast his tall, unmistakable shadow on the wall opposite. If Buboe fired his scatter gun now the shrapnel blast would be wasted so the tox bomb it was. He had a preference for their very unpleasant form of death-dealing anyway.

With a practised arm Buboe hurled the flask at the jetty.

The crude grenade bounced off the wall opposite him and smashed a few feet from where Creed was standing, splashing the planks of the pier with glowing radioactive gunk. The corrosive slime quickly ate its way through the wood, a thick cloud of noxious gas rising from the decking.

\* \* \*

TOX BOMB! Creed thought and with lightning reactions pulled the compact respirator from a coat pocket, placing it over his mouth and nose. Flicking his photo-visor down from inside the brim of his hat he peered through the toxic

smoke.

Thanks to the enhanced optics of the visor he was able to see the scavvy through the gas-cloud. He was shouldering a crude weapon made up of a number of short, tubular barrels bound to a ceramite stock. It was the scavvies' way to construct their firearms from whatever they could scavenge in the badzones, that and steal them from their victims.

What had originally been intended to hinder him Creed was now able to turn to his advantage. Under cover of the thick smoke he dropped off the pier and ducked under the jetty.

Now we'll see how you like it, Creed said to himself.

\* \* \*

THE SCAVVY WAS in position by the time the deadly pollutant cloud began to dissipate, his scatter gun trained on the spot where the bounty hunter should now be doubled up in a coughing fit, choked by the poisonous fumes of his tox bomb. But there was nobody there.

The report of a stubber rang out around the wharf. Buboe also heard the crack of shattering pottery. A split second later he felt the hot acid pain of his hip being eaten away. In stupefied silence he looked down at the bag hanging from his waist. Gas was already pouring from the bullet hole in the sacking and through the ragged hole where the corrosive contents of the shattered tox bombs had burnt it away. Where his right hip had been, a smoking hole in his ragged robes revealed a gaping wound that continued to expand as the concentrated toxic waste dissolved everything it came into contact with.

As the gas-cloud swallowed him the skin of his withered hands began to melt, yellow-white pustules bursting, open sores bubbling. The acrid smell of the acidic slime eating into his own body filled his nostrils. Then he found his voice.

Screaming, the flesh sloughing from his face and hands, the scavvy turned to see the bounty hunter standing in the shadows beneath the raised walkway, the smouldering tip of cheroot glowing in the dark. Enveloped in a yellow-green cloud, the last thing Buboe Kaynn saw before his bones dissolved was the white flash of a grin on the grimy, stubbled face of Nathan Creed.

\* \* \*

THE BOUNTY HUNTER stepped into the side street, flicking the tails of his leather coat back over his holstered guns, his hands hovering over the butts,

fingers itching to pull the triggers.

‘Dead end, swamp boy,’ Creed called out to the hunched brutish figure at the end of the closed off alleyway. And I mean dead!’

‘That you bounty-man?’ the figure sneered.

‘Well it’s not your mama, scuzzhead,’ Creed retorted. ‘Looks you’ve got the advantage. Now you must be-‘

‘Ezra Kaynn,’ the scavvy replied, his malformed mouth slurring the words.

A low, menacing growl came from behind Creed, close to the ground, and the bounty hunter felt the hairs on the back of his neck rise. Quick as a bolt of energy from a ruptured plasma feed, Creed went for his guns.

An’ that’s Ripper.’

Creed rotated on the spot, pulling both stubbers from his gun-belt, as the dog jumped. At the same moment the scavvy turned, with one sharp jerk of his arm lashing the cruelly spiked tip his barbed whip towards the bounty hunter. In turning his attention to the apparently more immediate threat Creed had opened himself up to attack from the whip-wielding scavvy!

The over-large jaws of one of the mutant hound’s heads latched onto the gunman’s raised stubber as the end of the whip knotted itself around his other wrist, cruel barbs digging into his skin. The dog’s second head snapped at Creed, tearing open the sleeve of his coat and grazing the flesh beneath. The brutish scavvy gave the whip a tug and the spiked cord tightened around Creed’s wrist, ripping open blood vessels and making him drop the gun he held in his left hand.

All this took only seconds and in the time it takes to draw breath, the bounty hunter recovered himself. Pushing the muzzle of his stub gun even further down the dog’s throat he fired off a round. The animal’s head exploded in a red spray of canine blood, brains and bone, just as the second head latched onto his arm with its fangs, its reeking breath making him gag momentarily. Its teeth sank into his arm, grating against the bone, making his fingers spring open and he dropped the stubber in his right hand. Wincing against the pain, Creed swung his arm round, smashing the dog’s remaining head against the alley wall. The already dying creature released its grip and fell to the ground.

‘Ripper!’ the scavvy cried out in anguish.

Grabbing the whip with both hands, the needle points cutting through his glove, the bounty hunter gave the cord a sharp tug. Creed’s wiry frame belied his brute strength. Ezra Kaynn found himself stumbling forward and the whip slipped from his grasp. Not bothering to free his wrist of the wound cord, the bounty hunter covered the ground between him and the scavvy while his opponent was still trying to recover his footing. Before the scavvy could

defend himself Creed was behind him. Holding the other end of the lash in his right hand he looped the barbed and knotted cord around Ezra Kaynn's head and pulled it tight.

The scavvy gave a strangled gasp as the barbs dug into his neck and the whip constricted his windpipe. Ezra's eyes bulged and his face turned purple, desperate fingers scrabbling at the constricting cord. With a gurgling groan the brutish degenerate gave up the fight. Creed felt the scavvy become a dead weight within the noose of the improvised garrotte and let the body fall face down in the dirt. Before recovering his guns, the bounty hunter set about removing the whip from his torn wrist.

A whooping yell, shrill as the scream of a face-eater, almost made him jump out of his skin and caused him to look round. Out of the corner of his eye he had the impression of the brickwork coming alive behind him as something detached itself from the wall of the alleyway.

But there was no one else here! Creed thought in a moment of shocked surprise.

Hands grabbed him around the neck as someone leapt onto his back. Hard heels kicked him viciously and repeatedly in the kidneys as bony fingers squeezed his windpipe closed. Now it was Creed's turn to gasp for air.

Creed threw himself backwards, trying to crush whoever was on his back against the wall behind him. He heard a gasp, as if his assailant had been winded, but this was then followed by a cackling laugh. The feet kicked again and the fingers dug even deeper into his throat. As grey shapes began to swim in front of his eyes Creed grabbed the thin arms of the scavvy on his back. Before he blacked out he bent double, at the same time pulling on the man's arms, using the momentum to help him throw his assailant over his head.

A small, wiry creature, naked except for a spider-hide loincloth and a necklace of finger bones, and with a shock of spiked hair landed in the dust on the ground in front of him. It seemed to Creed that the man's skin was mottled the same colour as the wall. Putting the thought from his mind he pulled his boot knife from its scabbard next to his leg and plunged it into the little man's chest. The chameleonic scavvy let out a baleful wail and reached for the blade sticking out of its sternum. With one twist of the knife Creed silenced the man's cries.

At once the mottling on the scavvy's skin began to fade, returning to a more 'natural' colour. Creed had heard rumours of wyrds having such powers, their psychic powers allowing them to camouflage themselves against any background they might choose. Whether it worked by the ward's skin actually changing colour and texture or whether the psyker simply clouded the minds of

those around him to hide his presence, fooling their brains into thinking there was nothing there, mattered not. Loko 'Raving Insane' Kaynn was now dead too.

Five down, two to go, Creed thought to himself.

\* \* \*

ROCKING ON THE back legs of the chair, with his booted feet resting on the table in front of him, Creed picked up the last piece of gun mechanism from the oil cloth spread out on the table top and eased it back into place. Holding the gleaming stub gun in one hand, marvelling at its blue-grey shine, with the other he spun the bullet chamber. 'Looking good,' he drawled.

'You done for now, bounty-man!' Django Kaynn shouted at him. He had chewed through his gag and Creed saw no point in replacing it now. Chances were the starving cannibal would want to bite off a few of his fingers if he even tried. He was still cuffed after all.

'That so?' the bounty hunter said, taking a drag on the stub of his cheroot.

'Big brother'll come for yous. Then yousa gonna be sorry! Gator's meaner than a sackful of starvin' ripperjacks.'

Creed laid the gun carefully on the table and flexed his right hand. Under the tear in his coat sleeve a bloodstained bandage was wound tightly round the dog bite. Gonna have to get myself a jab from old Doc Haze for that, he thought, making a mental note. He still owes me for that Fester Hole job.

'An' 'e never goes anywhere without 'is Scaly-friend Nuwt. Nuwt don't say much but 'e could crush every bone in yer body, an' 'e will!'

'I'm ready for them,' the bounty hunter said, adjusting the tourniquet wrapped around his left wrist, and nodded back over his shoulder.

In front of the lock-up a barricade of oil-drums, an overturned cart and other detritus formed a stockade almost right around the jailhouse. Unslinging an ammo belt Creed began to load his cleaned and oiled stub guns.

THE NITRATE GLOOM of dome-dusk had given way to the petroleum black of hive-night. In the distance, beyond the town, areas of the Sumpscum Marshes were illuminated by the uranium glow of the contaminant fields.

In a cascade of a dozen tiny incandescent explosions, a hail of bullets streaked out of the darkness and into the barricade. Crates splintered and pieces of debris were thrown into the air around the lock-up. A last shell impacted against the wall next to the open door in a cloud of plaster dust.

Whoever he is he's well-armed, Creed noted without any pleasure.

'Theys here! Theys here!' the imprisoned scavvy yelled excitedly.

'Bounty-man? I got yer attention?' the guttural shout came out of the night.

Cautiously Creed peered over the parapet of his barricade. In the intermittent flicker of a sparking electric lamp on the opposite side of the square he could make out two figures half in cover behind a jumble of plastic cargo crates. One was tall and, his outline suggested, heavily-muscled. The other was a giant outhouse of a shadow, almost as broad across its shoulders as its hunched form was tall. It was the first who had spoken.

'My name's Gator Kaynn and this here's my associate,' the tall figure gestured to the mass next to him. 'Say hello, Nuwt.' The mutant let out a deep, rumbling growl.

Stub guns roaring, Creed bombarded the two scavvy gangers with his own bullet-storm. Gator Kaynn returned fire. In the near-darkness Creed saw the scaly heft something into the air. He ducked a split second before the heavy, serrated metal disc hummed over his head and cut through the doorframe behind him. Both barrels blazing, the bounty hunter resumed the firefight.

Over the recoil roar of the two sides' guns Creed could hear Django screaming support for his 'brothers'. Gunshots threw up dust from the rocky ground and pieces of both barricades disintegrated in the crossfire. It didn't take long before both of them had emptied every chamber. A hush fell over the town square as the scavvy and the bounty hunter hurriedly reloaded.

'You still there, bounty-man, or have you run back to your scummer hovel?' Gator shouted, trying to goad his quarry into unthinking action.

'I'm still here,' the bounty hunter railed, 'but I'm surprised you are, swamp boy. You realise this is the end of the Kaynn Clan? And the name's Creed.'

'Big words from a big mouth, scuzzhead!' the scavvy shouted back. 'You got the guts to back 'em up?'

The longer Creed kept the idiot scavvy talking the more time he had to reload both stubbers. The chambers of one fully replenished, he slipped the first bullet of a dozen into the second empty weapon. 'Your stinking sewer-filth bloodline stops here! I took down all your maniac brothers. What makes you think I can't bring you down too?'

'Him,' Gator said as Creed heard the reptile growl and the grating of scales on stone behind him.

The bounty hunter turned as the great, white sumpgator lashed its thick tail at him. It hit his right arm with a sickening crack and Creed felt lances of white hot agony shoot through his arm. The shock caused his legs to give way beneath him. Gritting his teeth against the excruciating pain Creed clutched at

his broken limb, precious ammunition tumbling to the ground, while the loaded stubber fell from his hand.

‘Helmawr’s rump!’ Creed cursed. The freaking lizard must’ve slipped in round the back! The cacophony of the shoot out had drowned out any sound made by the sumpgator as it had breached the barricade and waddled up to Creed from behind.

‘Attaboy, croc!’ Django shouted, his face pressed against the window grille. ‘Rip ‘is arms off!’

The albino reptile fixed the bounty hunter with a cold, yellow stare. Its crocodile jaws slowly opened and the monster growled again. Dragging its three-metre long bulk forward on splayed stumpy legs the sumpgator prepared to finish what it had already started.

With one gun practically empty and the other, for the moment, unreachable Creed had to think fast. He wasn’t sure a dum-dum round could penetrate the adamantium hard skull of a sumpgator, even at this close range. His predicament helping him suppress the screaming pain of his broken arm, Creed fumbled inside his coat with his left hand. After a frantic search he pulled out a fist-sized metal object. Flicking the pin from the grenade Creed armed the firing mechanism. Waiting until he could feel its moist foetid breath on his face, Creed tossed the grenade into the creature’s mouth. The sumpgator gulped and swallowed the frag grenade.

Its scavvy master bounded over the unmanned barricade in time to see the sumpgator’s stomach erupt in an explosive blast of blood and gristle, that tore the monster apart. Gator Kaynn landed almost on top of the bounty hunter, hatred burning in his maddened stare. Slamming the open breach of the stub gun still gripped in his left hand shut against his knee, Creed brought the trusted firearm, with its single, precious round to bear against the scavvy’s head, and fired. The report of the weapon was deadened by the mass of grey tissue that now burst from the shattered skull. Gator Kaynn’s corpse joined that of his pet on the ground before the disbelieving Django’s horrified gaze.

Still one scavver standing, Creed thought as he staggered to his feet, his right arm hanging uselessly at his side.

The barricade exploded in a maelstrom of splintering wood and flying oil-drums as the massive bulk of the scaly burst through it. Creed turned the stub gun on the hulking mutant. Automatically, without thinking, he pulled the trigger. Its single cartridge spent, the only sound that came from the gun was the hollow click of an empty chamber. No more bullets and no time to reload.

Bellowing, the scaly charged. Pounding towards the bounty hunter at speed, the outcome seemed inevitable. But at the last possible moment Creed dodged.

Twisting out of his path, Creed struck out with a leg, tripping the reptilian mutant as it hurtled past. Unable to halt the momentum of its stumbling charge, the scaly smashed into the lock-up, crashing through the wall in an avalanche of bricks and steel.

It was too much for the crumbling structure of the building, mortar and bolts corroded by years of exposure to the chemical mists that rolled in off the polluted marshlands. With a crash of collapsing masonry and the groan of buckling girders the jailhouse collapsed on top of the scaly. With a dull crunch, a steel roof beam came down on the scaly's skull. Nuwt remained motionless among the rubble of the demolished lock-up.

Nathan Creed surveyed the devastation around him, the ruins of the barricade, the bodies of his foes, the pile of rubble that had been the settlement's lock-up. Wiping reptilian digestive juices and gristle from his face he was suddenly reminded of the agony of his broken arm.

Now, where are you, old girl? he wondered as he began overturning and upending pieces of debris in search of his missing, and loaded, stub gun.

In a shower of plaster dust the ugly head of Django Kaynn emerged from the rubble ruin of the lock-up. Somehow he had survived the destruction of the building where the scaly had not. His hands still secured behind his back he staggered out from among the wreckage and started to run.

Jailbreak! thought Creed. After everything that's happened. The murdering slimeball's determined, I'll give him that, but this ends now!

He needed a gun and his were useless: one empty, the other buried beneath the wreckage. The dead Gator still clutched a looted autopistol in one hand. Prising it free of the scavvy's stiffened grip, Creed raised the weapon with his good hand. Gator had been kind enough to fit it with a fresh clip before he died. Sighting along the barrel he took aim at the fleeing prisoner. Two shots rung out across the town square. With a yelping cry Django dropped to the ground in the dust and dirt, both knees shot out.

The bounty hunter walked up to the whimpering, crippled scavvy. Hearing the tread of his footsteps Django opened watery eyes to see what Creed was going to do to him next. 'I thought you wanted me alive,' he sobbed.

Creed pulled the scavvy's head up sharply by his hair and held a grubby piece of parchment in front of his face. On it were crude pen and ink sketches of the members of the Kaynn Clan Gang. It was obvious that the artist's impressions had been drawn by someone who had been told what the mutant mob looked like but who had never seen them in the flesh. Gothic script accompanied the pictures but this meant nothing to the illiterate cannibal.

'Can you see what that says,' the bounty hunter asked in his husky drawl,

‘or shall I read it for you? “The Kaynn Clan Gang, wanted dead!”’

Slowly it began to dawn on Django what Creed’s plan had been all along. He swallowed hard as his own fate became clear.

‘Who’d be mad enough to want a murdering bunch of cannibals brought in alive?’ Creed said, the butt of a cheroot still clenched between his teeth.

‘Then why dincha come into the Sumpscum after us, ya yellow-bellied bastard?’

‘What, enter that sludge jelly-infested death-trap when I could get the whole, brainless family to come to me?’ The bounty hunter’s face was an inscrutable mask as he pressed the muzzle of the autopistol against the scavvy’s head.

‘You’re dead, bounty-man! Mama’s gonna be mighty mad when she hears ‘bout this. And she will. She’ll hunt you down like a scavvy hound! She will! She’ll come for you!’ Django spat, pain and fear becoming defiant fury.

Wincing, Creed withdrew a second bounty poster from the depths of his coat and shook it open in front of the scavvy’s face. Django Kaynn stared at it, eyes wide open in shocked surprise. The image of a hideous, hairy, toothless crone scowled back at him.

The bounty hunter smiled coldly: ‘I’m counting on it.’