

# **BONEGRINDER**

*Josh Reynolds*

*Seasoned Black Library author Josh Reynolds brings his own inimitable style to Necromunda. In a tale of gang rivalries and territory disputes, Josh's unique brand of humour and flair for action brings the Underhive to life.*

The air smelled like hot slag and sour meat.

The stink of the backstreets rose and fell with the cycle of the great circulation fans that loomed over Steelgate like judgemental deities. Molten runoff from the furnaces trickled slowly through ferrocrete canals. It cast up ugly, yellow shrouds of toxic smog, and stained the brickwork of the buildings that leaned into one another like punch-drunk fighters. Every door and window rattled with the crash and clangour of the smelting works.

The sound of industry was the heartbeat of the settlement. A thirty-six-hour cycle, as the thump-pits and furnaces processed raw ore into something valuable. At hour thirty-seven, a rain of coolant fell across the streets, spewed from unseen vents on high, dousing the fires and smothering the molten slag so that it could be scraped out of the canals for reprocessing.

Topek Greel stood atop a gantry on the south side, watching as the coolant fell and calmed the roiling tides of molten material in the canal below. It changed colours as the liquid hit it, and expelled fumes of iridescent smoke. It was almost pretty, in its way, though he'd never say so to anyone. Aesthetic appreciation was not among the cardinal virtues of House Goliath. Only strength mattered. Power.

Beauty was for the weak.

The Steelgate Kings lived by that axiom, much like the settlement for which they were named. It was evident even in the former foundry the gang used as a flophouse – a grey slab of a building, studded with gantries and ore-shafts, barely lit at the best of times. It was always full of noise, thanks to the gambling den that occupied what had once been the foundry

floor. Card-slingers, ragmen and doxies filled the place every late-cycle, extracting credits from passing traders and locals alike.

Greel glanced over his shoulder. Music crept out through the crumbling walls behind him, as if to taunt him. He heard the familiar voices of his fellow gangers bellowing in pleasure – or in anger, in the case of Guzzler. Annoyed, he turned back to the canal. He couldn't sleep when it was like this. Couldn't do anything. So instead, he came out here, where no one would follow him.

He turned, letting his flat, dark gaze drift across the tin roofs and corrugated chimney pipes of the south side. It was mostly workers here. Bosses and overseers lived to the east, above the stink and heat of the canals. Most of them, anyway. He smirked and spat.

The Steelgate Kings were bosses as well, in all but name. They held turf from the toll-gates to the smelting works. The heart of the settlement was theirs, and they'd made an effort to keep Steelgate firmly under the thumb of House Goliath. That didn't mean that they didn't have challengers, however. And not all of them from rival houses.

Gangs grew and splintered. It was part of the ecosystem of the Underhive. The Kings had no less than five by-blows, each looking to be top of the heap.

Greel smiled, rolling the word over in his head. He'd recently added it to the list of words he'd learned. The list was hidden where no one could find it. Korg didn't like it when his boys wasted time on unimportant things like how to scribe and read.

But Greel knew that knowledge was a type of stim. It was power, especially down here. The more you knew, the more powerful you were.

For instance, Greel knew that of the five gangs the Kings had spawned, only two were left, and only one was something to worry about. And that one was the Scrap Lords. Instinctively, he looked north, towards the scrapyards and fungus orchards. That was where the Scrap Lords had set their banners. They ruled those canyons of discarded metal and unusable ore, and traded with the midden-pickers of House Cawdor.

But the Scrap Lords wanted more. They wanted to be Kings. He knew that too.

It had started small. The way it always did. A few too many drinks. An argument – a harsh word in the right ear – and then the shooting had

started. Just skirmishes so far, but it would get worse before it got better. Or so Greel hoped.

It hadn't required much in the way of finesse – another good word – to get the Scrap Lords and the Kings at each other's throats. The confrontation had been brewing for a while. Grinder Jax, the leader of the Lords, had a grudge, and a man with a grudge was as good as a loaded gun. Now, all Greel had to do was wait.

Unfortunately, that was always the hardest part.

A klaxon sounded, somewhere down below, signalling the end of the down-cycle. The rain of coolant slowed to a trickle, dappling the streets. With sections of the ore now cooled, slag-pickers shuffled towards the canal. They wore bulky hazard suits that had been passed down through generations. Each suit was festooned with crude heat sinks and air recyclers, and had been repaired so often that they more resembled primitive armour than anything else. Using long, sharpened scoops, they began to neatly cut away the cooling slag and deposit it into waiting canisters.

Greel admired their precision. It reminded him of when he'd been a valve-jack. Precision was everything up among the high pipes, above the Spew. You had to think, to count and gauge and listen, or you were dead. You had to be precise. Greel liked to think that he still was, even a year off the foundry floor.

A voice spoke up behind him. 'Nothing goes to waste in Steelgate.'

Greel turned. The tall, heavy shape of Irontooth Korg moved carefully through the hatch and out onto the gantry. It creaked dolefully beneath his weight and Greel tensed instinctively, ready to leap to safety. He'd spent his youth as a valve-jack, and you had to learn how to translate creaks into leaps quickly on the Spew.

'Thought I'd find you out here.'

'I was watching the slag-pickers.'

Korg came to stand beside him. 'I know.'

Greel glanced surreptitiously at Korg. He and his leader were of a similar type. House Goliath bred its sons and daughters for strength and endurance and not much else. Korg was the bigger of the pair, with twenty-five years' worth of hard living and stimm addiction to make his muscles swell and pop beneath his battered furnace-plates. A single flat strip of hair ran

across his scalp, splitting into a profusion of thin plaits that dangled across the back of his thick neck. It was his face that drew most of the attention, however.

Someone – now likely dead – had almost torn Korg’s lower jaw off at some point early in his career. Greel had heard that it had happened the day Korg had taken control of the Steelgate Kings. The augmetic replacement that had been fitted in the missing jaw’s place was a crude, prognathous thing, its sides studded with pneumatics and valves. These mechanisms extended beneath the flesh of his cheeks, and hooked into his auto-rig.

A similar rig hung around Greel’s own neck. The tech-collar regulated the stimms that flowed through his system and kept his body functioning. Every son of House Goliath had one. A leash, given to the hands of their masters. Even Korg had a master, somewhere. It was like a chain with many links. Korg was one, and Greel was another.

Greel ran a calloused palm over his scalp. A single stripe of hair ran down the centre of his skull. He kept it clipped short, rather than growing it up and out, like some of the others. It wasn’t as if he needed the extra height, and it gave an opponent less to grab onto in a fight.

Korg leaned on the gantry rail, causing it to shift alarmingly. Greel watched him carefully. Korg didn’t like him. Korg didn’t like anyone. Korg didn’t trust anyone, except maybe the man who supplied the Kings with crate-beer. And even then he had someone taste his beer first. ‘I like it when it rains,’ Korg said. ‘Cools everything down. When things are cool, stuff gets done. Too hot, machinery breaks down and men with it.’

Greel remained silent.

Korg continued to watch the rain. ‘It’s too hot right now. Too much steel being flashed, for no reason. Men make bad decisions, when it’s too hot. Business suffers.’ Korg’s hands clenched, and the metal railing bent like paper.

Greel hesitated. Then, taking a breath, he said, ‘The Scrap Lords started it.’ They hadn’t – Greel had – but he was fairly certain Korg didn’t know that. If Irontooth had, Greel knew he’d already be dead. The others – Thend, Pasco, even Guzzler – would back him up. They’d been spoiling for a fight, any fight, for months.

‘Don’t matter who started it. The Guilders don’t like it.’ Korg’s voice was

even. Calm. Or as calm as it got. Greel recognised the signs. Korg was thinking the problem through. He'd already come to a decision, but now he was doing the work of justifying it to himself. That didn't explain why he'd come looking for Greel, though.

He wanted to ask why, but didn't. 'You going to scrag Jax?'

Korg was silent for a long moment. Greel began to worry that he'd pushed it too far. There was no telling what would set Korg off. Finally, Korg stepped back from the bent rail, his hands flexing idly.

'Everything has a purpose. We waste nothing here. Neither ore nor blood.' He looked at Greel. 'You understand?'

Greel nodded. 'I do.'

'Good.' Korg leaned over the edge of the gantry and spat, before turning away. 'Scrap Lords want to parlay. You understand that?'

Greel nodded again. 'I do. We gonna meet?'

Korg smiled. It was an ugly expression, made worse by the steel sheen of his teeth. 'Yeah. Already arranged. Got the softlings excited. They expect to see blood.'

'They think you're going to thump Jax.'

'Or that he's going to thump me.'

Greel decided to push a bit more. 'Can he?'

Korg paused. His hands – big, ugly scoops of muscle – twitched. He looked at Greel, his gaze hooded. 'We'll see, won't we?'

'We?'

'You're coming with me to the parlay. You're going to be my second.' What was left of Korg's mouth quirked in a ghastly smile. 'It's an honour.'

Greel grunted, but didn't say anything. Gratitude was weakness. Goliaths deserved whatever honours and glories came their way. Korg's smile widened, and Greel thought he was pleased. Korg gestured as he stepped towards the hatch. 'Come.'

Greel frowned. 'Now?'

Korg reached the hatch. 'Weren't you listening? It's cool now. Good time to talk.' He paused and glanced back. 'But bring your spud-jacker. Just in case.'

Guzzler and the others were waiting for them downstairs, on the foundry floor. Like Greel, they were all big and young. Guzzler was the tallest, with dozens of stumm-nodes jutting from his flesh and his head bare of

everything save tribal tattoos.

Thend and Pasco were shorter, but broader than Guzzler. Pasco was dark, with a heavy crest of crimson hair riding his scalp, and his furnace-plates were covered in notches – one for every skull he'd busted. Thend was pale, and his face had been tattooed to resemble a skull. Similarly, bones had been inked on his bare arms, and a ribcage was carved into the furnace-plates that covered his torso.

Together, the trio made up the gang's inner circle. They'd been with Korg since before he'd been running things, and had risen with him. They worked together to keep the rest of the gang in line, where possible. And if anyone wanted to challenge Korg, they had to get past those three first. Thend's expression was almost impossible to read, thanks to his tattoos. 'Runt,' he said, amiably.

Greel grinned. He liked Thend.

'Valve-jack too stupid to get out of the rain,' Guzzler said. Pasco chortled at this display of wit. Greel's smile slipped and his hands curled into fists. Korg swiped a hand out, silencing his retort before it left his lips.

'I like the rain,' Korg said. He held Guzzler's eyes for a moment, long enough to make the ganger look away. Then he jerked his head. 'Tool up. We got a parlay to go to.'

It didn't take long to decide who was going. In the end, there were eight of them. Korg chose Lorg, Jok and Big Sledge to round things out. Lorg and Jok were nothing special – muscles, looking for a place to flex. Thend called them meat shields, when they were out of earshot. Big Sledge lived up to his name. Too many growth stimms had made him into a mountain of muscle. Or that was the rumour, at any rate. Greel had never asked. A conversation with Big Sledge often required more effort than it was worth.

All of them were geared up in furnace-plates and armed. Pasco had even brought his thumper – a bulky automatic grenade launcher. Greel had his stub pistol holstered at the small of his back, out of sight, and had thrust his spud-jacker through his belt, within easy reach.

Korg never carried a gun. He was content with his renderizer. The big, serrated axe was meant to be wielded with two hands, but Korg swung it easily enough with one. Greel had seen Irontooth split an unlucky scummer nearly in two with one blow.

It was still raining as they made their way to the harbour. The coolant

made the air taste strange, and left a slick residue on Greel's skin. It flattened Pasco's crest, and dripped from Guzzler's stimm-nodes. They were watched the entire way, pale faces poking out of shopfronts or from within alleyways. Children from the orphanarium-fane ran around them, murmuring in excitement, or darted ahead, carrying word of their approach. Word got around quick when trouble was in the air.

It didn't take long to get to the harbour. It straddled the rim of the great reservoir, like industrial spillage. Docks and jetties thrust out over the stagnant waters, where slime-farmers tended their floating patches. Trawlers made circuits of the opposite shore, dragging great mould-nets through the scum that coated the water's surface.

Occasionally, one of the trawlers would vanish, caught in a whirlpool created by the constant leakage of the reservoir's bottom. The water level never dipped for too long though. Between the Spew and runoff from the levels above, it was constantly topped up.

Greel didn't care for the docks. They smelled of mould and damp wood and sheen bird droppings. The biomechanical avians nested in the high places above the settlement, roosting in ancient ductwork or dispersal pipes. At up-cycle, they circled the reservoir, and the air was choked with their static-y screeches.

The representatives of the Scrap Lords were waiting for them when they arrived. Ten of them, strung out along the street. Greel recognised some of them. Two Pistols Lono. Smasher Fosk. The rest were new faces – scraplings, freshly taken from the foundry floors.

'New meat,' said Thend.

'He's insulting us,' Guzzler said, flatly.

'Testing,' Greel murmured.

Guzzler looked at him. 'What'd you say, valve-jack?'

'He's testing us. Seeing if we came to talk – or to scrap.'

'Why not both?' Pasco said. He patted his thumper fondly. 'Want I should start the ball, Irontooth?'

'No. We came to parlay. Not to spill blood. He wants to start things – fine. But Irontooth Korg keeps his word.' Korg spoke loudly, for the benefit of the watching Scrap Lords. 'Ask anyone – Irontooth Korg doesn't lie.'

'Neither do we, Irontooth.' Smasher Fosk stepped forward, a heavy power

hammer in his hands. He held the weapon low, so as not to brandish it. ‘Lies are for the weak. The strong don’t need them.’ He swept his gaze across Greel and the others, stopping on Guzzler. ‘Which one is your second?’

Korg tapped a knuckle against Greel’s furnace-plate. ‘Him.’

Fosk blinked, processing this. ‘You sure?’

‘He’s sure,’ Greel said, letting his hand rest on his spud-jacker.

Fosk grinned, showing busted teeth. ‘Good enough.’ He stepped aside. ‘You two go on. Rest of you stay here.’

‘Who are you to tell us where we can go in our town?’ Guzzler snarled. The other Kings bristled, and the Scrap Lords tensed in reply. To Greel, the air seemed to crackle, and he knew that all it would take was one word – one twitch – to set them at each other’s throats.

It wasn’t that he wanted a war, so much as he wanted the opportunities that inevitably came with one. A man could do a lot with a war. He could rise high, or lose everything. He could make alliances, enemies, fortunes... he could take power from those who had it.

No, Greel didn’t want a war. He just wanted to climb the chain.

But as he wondered whether here was as good a place as any to start, he realised Korg was watching him. Not carefully or closely. Just idly. As if Greel might do something of interest. A chill flickered through him. Not fear. Not exactly. It was the same sort of sensation you got when you thought the pipe beneath your feet was getting ready to burst.

His hand eased away from his spud-jacker. ‘They called the parlay,’ he said. Guzzler rounded on him, a snarl plastered across his face. But before he could speak, Korg dropped a hand on his shoulder.

‘Greel is right. They call parlay, they make the terms. Stay here. Eyes open, fists full.’

Guzzler gave a grudging nod and stepped back. Pasco and the others took up positions facing the Scrap Lords. If it came to a fight, it’d be bloody and quick. No time to run for cover. Just two groups slugging it out until one dropped. Just the way the Goliaths liked it.

Fosk stepped back and swung out an arm, indicating the way was clear. Greel followed Korg onto the docks. The smell of damp grew worse, and the slap of slimy waters against ferrocrete pylons became loud.

Grinder Jax was waiting for them out at the end of a rusted jetty. He sat

on the dock, in a chair he'd brought himself. There was a small table, and a second chair waiting for Korg.

Jax was a similar size to Korg. His hair rose in a stiff crest the colour of powdered corpse starch, and his face was a mass of scar tissue and tattoos. Unlike Korg, he wore his wealth – rings on his fingers and a necklace of credits rattling against his furnace-plates. Some of his teeth were gold as well. Rumour had it that if things went poorly at the gambling tables, Jax just punched himself in the face. He gestured. 'Sit, Irontooth.'

'I like to stand,' Korg growled. 'Man can't stand on his own two legs, he's fit for nothing but the slurry.'

Jax snorted. 'Ain't no one here but us, Irontooth.' He glanced at Greel as he said it, and Greel didn't know whether to be insulted or not. 'Ain't no one to impress. Sit or stand, don't matter none to me.'

Korg grunted and sat. The chair creaked. 'Good chair,' he said.

Jax looked out over the harbour. 'Made it myself.'

'Always did have a talent for it.'

'And you always had a talent for recognising talent.' Jax glanced at Korg. 'Though you never appreciated it when you found it.'

Korg rolled his eyes. 'You survived.'

'No thanks to you.' Jax indicated Greel. 'He new?'

'New enough.'

'He doesn't say much.'

'He's not supposed to.' Korg looked around. 'Where's yours?'

'She's close,' Jax smiled. Greel tensed. A sniper, perhaps – the Scrap Lords liked their toys. Korg laughed. He didn't seem concerned.

'Good enough. You called parlay. Start the ball rolling.'

Jax scratched his chin. 'Mostly, I just wanted to see what you wanted. Why your boys are squaring up to mine.'

'Is that right?'

'You deny it?' Jax pointed towards the settlement. 'Nearly had firefights break out on every square block. The Kings are blood-hungry, that's the word.'

'And the Scrap Lords aren't?'

Jax shook his head. 'Not like this. We didn't start it.'

Korg's eyes found Greel and, once more, Greel got the feeling of things slipping the wrong way. He wondered if Korg suspected. But Irontooth

merely spat. ‘So you say. Doesn’t matter, really.’ He leaned forward and cracked his knuckles. ‘I want you to back off, Jax. Play king of the scrapyards if you want, but don’t try and muscle in on our turf. Everything from the toll-gates to the smelting works is ours. That’s how it’s always been.’

‘Ain’t how it will always be, though.’ Jax rattled his necklace. ‘Thinking about it, maybe this is the time. We’re up and comers. Scrap is coming in and credits with it.’

‘Spend them somewhere else.’

Greel looked out over the harbour, as the discussion grew heated. The light from the smelting works turned the sump-waters a dull orange. Iron mould spores floated over the water in great, shimmering clouds. A few ancient helio-skimmers hummed over the slow waters, scraping the spores from the air. And something else – just at the edge of hearing. A soft, scratching sort of sound. Like leather rubbing against metal.

He looked down. The jetty had been a gantry, once. He could see down through the metal slats, into the waters below. Something was moving down there. Something big. The jetty shook as something slapped against a pylon.

‘See now, you upset her,’ Jax said.

Korg’s eyes narrowed. ‘And you’ve upset me, Jax. Things was good. Now you’re making trouble, and for what?’

Jax shrugged. ‘Maybe it’s time you learned to share, Korg. Steelgate is big enough for two bosses. Scav, it’s big enough for four or five. But I’m satisfied with two, if you are.’ He sat back. ‘I didn’t start this, and that’s the truth. Maybe it’s just time.’

Korg rose to his feet. ‘Maybe it is. Maybe we start now.’

Jax shot up, and matched him, glare for glare. ‘I’m okay with that. We can go full-tilt boogie right now, Irontooth. Lords versus Kings, winners take all.’

Greel’s hand crept towards his stub pistol. It didn’t matter who threw the first punch. Neither of them would leave the jetty. He’d see to it. It’d be chaos, for a while. Lots of chances to render down the old ore and make something new, as the saying went.

Korg suddenly stepped back, and smiled. ‘That’s a good idea, Jax.’

Jax froze, a look of puzzlement on his face. ‘What?’

Greel paused as well, confused by the sudden easing of tension. He'd been certain that they were about to throw down. He quickly pulled his hand away from his pistol and looked around. Had Korg seen something that he hadn't?

'A fight,' Korg said. 'Winner takes all. My second, against yours.'

Greel turned. Korg was smiling at him. The feeling of being on a bad pipe was back and worse than before. Korg knew. Somehow, he knew.

A slow grin spread across Jax's face. 'Oh, that's good. And what happens when my girl wins?'

Korg shrugged. 'We'll pull back. Let you move in to some territory. Split the settlement between us. And if my boy wins, you stay in your scrapyards. Everybody's happy, especially the Guilders.'

Jax laughed. 'Let's do it, then.'

Greel frowned, but said nothing. He'd been suckered. He saw that now. This was why Korg had chosen him as a second. But that was fine. He could handle it. 'Guns,' he said.

'No,' Jax said. 'No guns. Everything else is fine, though. My baby doesn't do guns. Not her style, you might say.'

Not a sniper, then. Greel relaxed slightly as Jax stuck two fingers in his mouth and whistled sharply.

For a moment, there was only the echo of the whistle, and the distant scrape of water. Then, something moved ponderously from below, smashing through part of the jetty and hauling itself out of the water with a coughing roar.

A broad, wedge-shaped snout quested upwards and gaped wide, disgorging a reek of rotting meat and mud. Hundreds of yellowing, splinter-like fangs flashed as heavy claws hooked the metal and dragged the rest of the massive reptilian beast onto the jetty. The structure wobbled perilously as the monster gave a rumble of discontent. Its tail slammed down, and the pylons below creaked and rocked.

'Say hello to Bonegrinder,' Jax said. 'Ain't she beautiful?'

Bonegrinder grunted, and expelled another gust of foul air from between its jaws. Snout to tail, it was longer than Greel was tall, and came up to his waist. It crouched on four, squat limbs, and its scaly body was as thick as a promethium drum. Six crimson eyes glowered at Greel from sockets set deep within the flat skull.

‘Sumpkrok,’ Greel muttered. This was definitely a bad pipe, but it was already too late to jump. Legend had it that the beasts were the descendants of some long-ago pet, discarded by some rich Spire-born fool and left to fend for itself in the pipes and sewers of the Underhive.

‘Amazing what you find in the scrapyards, ain’t it?’ Jax gave the beast a gentle pat. ‘Old Bonegrinder here is better than any gun or renderizer. A sumpkrok will eat anything if it’s hungry enough. That’s why I keep my girl here good and peckish.’

‘Greel ain’t half bad himself,’ Korg said, mildly. ‘He’s a smart one.’ He looked pointedly at Greel. ‘Ain’t you?’

Greel swallowed and drew his spud-jacker. It felt pitifully small in his hand, and he wondered what it felt like to be eaten by a sumpkrok. He glanced at Korg, but saw no salvation there. This was punishment, plain and simple. So be it. He’d learned how to roll with disaster on the Spew. If a pipe went, there was nothing for it but to jump, and hope you landed somewhere safe. Greel met Korg’s gaze and nodded tersely before turning to his waiting opponent. Jax stepped back and whistled again.

With a roar, Bonegrinder thudded forward. She moved more quickly than Greel had anticipated. Jaws wide, she came snapping, and he was forced to throw himself out of the path of her charge. The gantry pitched drunkenly as the animal whirled, tail nearly knocking Jax over. He and Korg scrambled for safety, leaving Greel alone on the swaying jetty.

The sumpkrok undulated towards him, a low bull-groan echoing from her throat sacs. Greel backed away, fighting to keep his balance. The jetty was going to collapse at this rate. The animal snapped at him again, teeth brushing past his arm. He’d seen what sumpkroks left behind. One bite was all they needed. If she got her teeth into him, he’d be dead. He lashed out with his spud-jacker, and caught her in the side of the head. It was like hitting a piece of furnace-plate.

He was sent sprawling as the animal crashed against him. He scrambled aside as Bonegrinder bit at him, trying to hook a leg or an arm. The gantry buckled. He turned, gripped the spud-jacker in both hands and brought it down hard, between where he thought her shoulder-blades were. The sumpkrok bellowed and her tail whipped around, heavy as a girder. He managed to leap over the scything appendage, but only just. As the soles of his boots touched metal, he felt one of the pylons below finally give

way.

The jetty lurched suddenly, nearly pitching him into the slimy waters. He hooked the slats with strong fingers, stopping his fall, and he grunted as his arm was hyperextended past his pain threshold. Sensing his elevated heart rate and surging adrenaline, his auto-rig fired more stimms into his bloodstream. His heartbeat became rapid, and the world went soft and frayed at the edges. The only thing that seemed real was Bonegrinder, as she slipped and scrabbled towards him, red eyes squinting in predatory focus.

He slammed his spud-jacker against the metal, drawing her on. 'Come on then,' he snarled. 'Come on!' He dragged his legs up, and bent them beneath him, holding himself in place with one hand. As Bonegrinder shuffled close, he sprang, and struck the beast in the snout. The sumpkrok twisted, snapping at him as he scrambled down her back. She rolled instinctively, slamming him into the jetty. The abrupt movement caused another pylon to give way with a screech of buckling metal.

The waters reached up for him, dragging him down into its cold depths. Bonegrinder followed him down as the sinking jetty filled his vision. The water was deeper here than he'd thought. He couldn't see the bottom. The pylons were bolted to a silt-encrusted chunk of scrap that rose from unlit depths. The sumpkrok arrowed down towards him, no longer awkward but swift and hideously graceful.

There was nowhere to go. He gritted his teeth and rolled as the weight crashed against him. He narrowly avoided her jaws, but her scaly flank drew blood from his side, where his furnace-plates didn't quite cover him.

He tumbled in a red cloud, and she turned with a sweep of her tail, coming for him again. This time, he was ready. He thrust his spud-jacker out vertically, right into her open jaws. The sumpkrok reflexively shut her mouth, and the tool became lodged in the folds of her maw. He knew it would only take her a moment to work the tool out. He needed a more permanent solution. He cast about, looking for a weapon, an edge, something.

He saw the jetty, sinking slowly in a cloud of rust particles, drifting down in sections. Despite the black spots dancing at the edge of his vision, and the slime burning his eyes and skin, a plan began to form. Goliaths could hold their breath longer than most, but he needed to end this quickly.

As the animal thrashed in fury, Greel clawed at the water, swimming towards the sinking jetty. He fought the drag of the current and his own straining lungs. Stimms pumped false strength through his aching limbs, and cleared the fatigue from his mind. He'd pay for it later, if he survived. But he needed them now. His idea required the precision that only stimms could give him.

He reached out to the jetty, caught hold of its rusty edge and pulled himself into its embrace. He threaded its shattered struts, gashing his shoulders and scalp, but not stopping, pushing himself faster and faster as the blackness swelled up behind his eyes. A few moments more, that was all he needed. Just a bit faster.

Behind him, he felt the vibrations of Bonegrinder following his trail. She sped after him, through the sinking sections of metal, her tail whipping back and forth. The sumpkrok was hungry, and stupid. A bad combination.

The jetty was still descending when he reached the opposite side, and the hole she'd surfaced through in the first place. He shot through it and its edge kissed his thighs and sent a shiver of pain through him. He twisted in a cloud of slime-bubbles, almost breathless.

As he spun, he saw Bonegrinder hit the hole a half-second after him. Not fast enough. Struts slammed down like the jaws of a trap, pinning the sumpkrok in place. A gout of bubbles burst from her jaws as she struggled against the metal caging her. It shifted slightly, but she was caught fast. Just as he'd hoped.

The jetty became wedged amid the remaining pylons, half in, half out of the water. Clouds of silt and rust rose around him like smoke. He caught hold of the metal and prepared to haul himself up, towards the open air. But he stopped. He looked down, meeting the beast's increasingly panicked gaze. She wouldn't be able to free herself. Not in time. She would drown down here.

He surrendered to his lungs' complaints and climbed up, surfacing with a gasp. Clinging to the fallen jetty, he looked up. Korg, Jax and the others were peering down. Korg smirked and patted Jax amiably on the shoulder. 'Looks like we win,' he said.

'Where's she at?' Jax said. 'Where's my baby?'

Greel looked at him, and then back down. 'Down there,' he said. 'Hold on.' Before anyone could stop him, he took a breath and plunged beneath

the water.

It was a stupid thing to do. Or maybe smart. He hadn't decided yet. Time would tell. He could barely see, but he felt his way down. On the Spew, you learned to work blind. He followed the vibrations. Bonegrinder was where he'd left her. She began to thrash as he got close, but he ignored it. He caught the edge of the hole that held her pinned, and he braced his feet to either side of her head. Stimms fired, pumping through him as his muscles swelled.

Metal shifted, creaked, groaned – and gave way at last. The sumpkrok lunged forward, knocking him aside. She thrashed for the surface, bleeding from a dozen small wounds. Greel pushed off the metal and followed her. The stimms were bleeding from his system now, leaving him weak and shaky. He barely managed to reach the surface.

Gasping, he dragged himself up the side of the jetty, and reached up towards the hands of his fellow gangers. Thend hauled him up. 'Smart play, runt,' he murmured. Greel was too tired to speak. He sank down onto his knees, slimy water running off him in sheets. He looked around. Guzzler, Pasco and the others were all there. At some point, they'd been allowed close to the action – the better to watch Bonegrinder eat him, he assumed. Guzzler was glaring at him, but the others seemed pleased. Or at least entertained.

Down below, Bonegrinder roared and splashed – angry, hungry, confused. A feeling shared by her master. Jax strode over to him, a frown on his face. 'You saved her. Why?'

Greel looked up at him. He spat water. 'Good fight,' he said.

Jax stared at him for a moment, and then laughed. 'Not that good. She lost.' He glanced at Korg, standing nearby. 'I see the Kings come by their reputation honestly.'

'We always have,' Korg said.

'Maybe so.' Jax sighed and looked out over the water. 'I would have liked living out here.' He shook his head. 'Maybe next time.'

Korg shrugged. 'Maybe. For now, get your sumpkrok out of my reservoir.'

Jax laughed again and walked off, calling out to his boys.

Korg watched him go, and turned to Thend and the others. 'Go with them. Make sure they leave.' As they trailed off to shadow the Scrap Lords, he

looked down at Greel, a speculative expression on his face.

‘Why’d you save it?’

‘Jax loves that thing. We kill her, he uses it as an excuse to start a fight.’

‘Maybe.’ Korg shook his head. ‘Thought you were clever, didn’t you?’ His voice was pitched low, so that no one else could hear. ‘Thought you’d start a war, see what it got you, huh?’

Greel considered his reply, and then nodded. If Korg already knew, there was no point trying to lie about it.

Korg snorted. ‘Yeah. Real smart.’ He paused. ‘I don’t like smart. Smart is trouble waiting to happen. But it took guts to thump that sumpkrok and then save it. Jax owes us now and he knows it.’

‘Owes me,’ Greel said.

Korg grunted and considered this. ‘Yeah. You got guts and smarts. Maybe too much of both.’ He fixed Greel with a hard stare. ‘We don’t waste anything in Steelgate. Not ore, not blood. Everything’s got a use. Even smarts.’ He set his boot on the back of Greel’s neck, and forced him flat against the ground. ‘But sometimes no matter how useful something is, it still gets broken.’

The weight pressed down on Greel’s neck and spine, and he felt his already abused bones creak alarmingly. A bit more pressure, and they’d snap. Greel clawed at the ground, trying to alleviate the growing pain, but his exertion had stolen his strength. The stimms were fading, and his body felt flaccid and drained.

The pain grew, red bulbs of agony blossoming behind his eyes. But just when Greel thought Korg was planning to grind his neck to dust, the gang leader said, ‘You understand now?’

‘Yeah,’ Greel said, through gritted teeth.

Korg let him go and turned away. ‘Good. On your feet. You’re a King, remember?’

Greel climbed slowly, painfully, to his feet, and rubbed the back of his neck. He watched Korg walk away, and then leaned over and spat into the water below.

‘I remember,’ he said, softly.