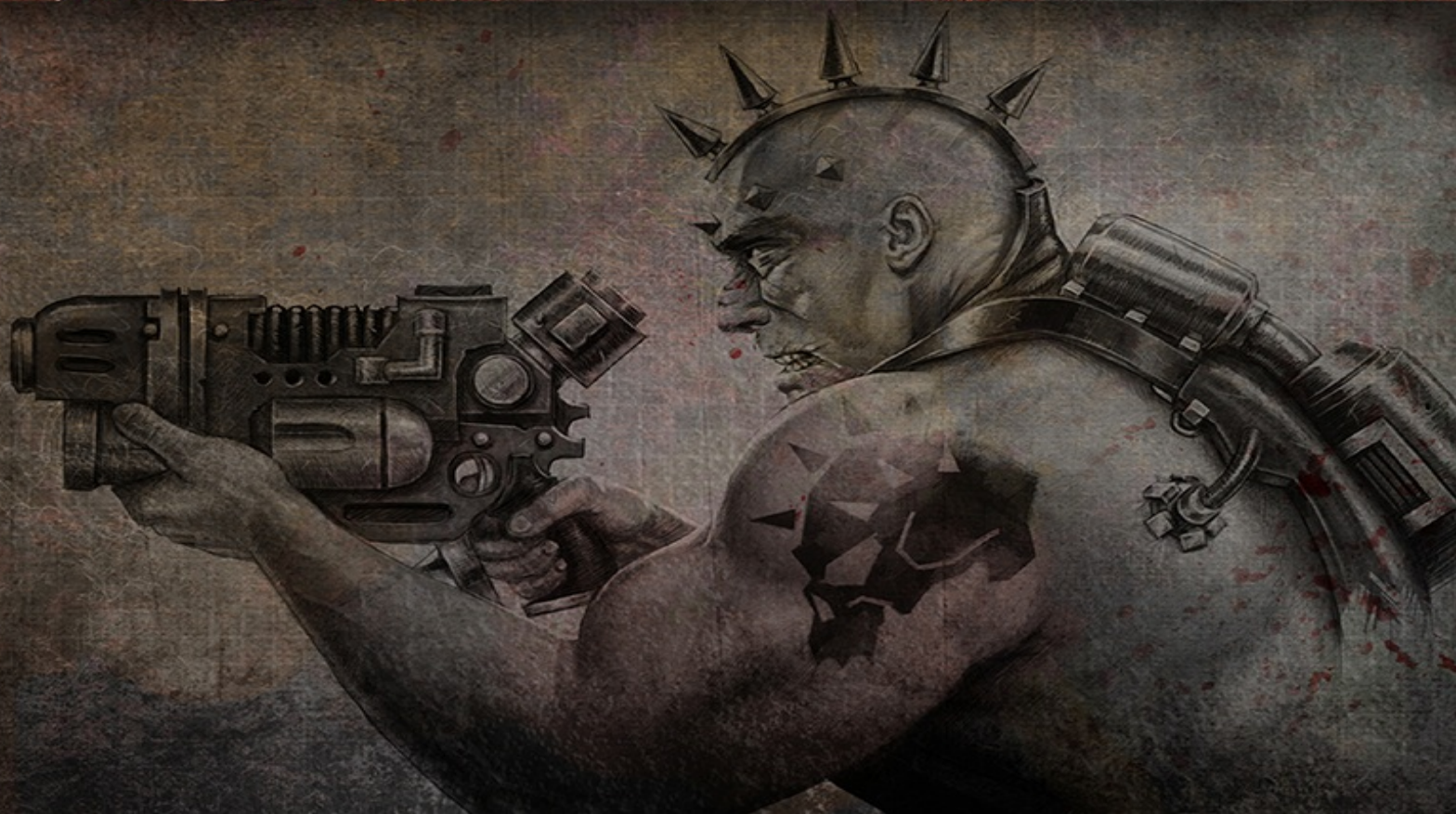


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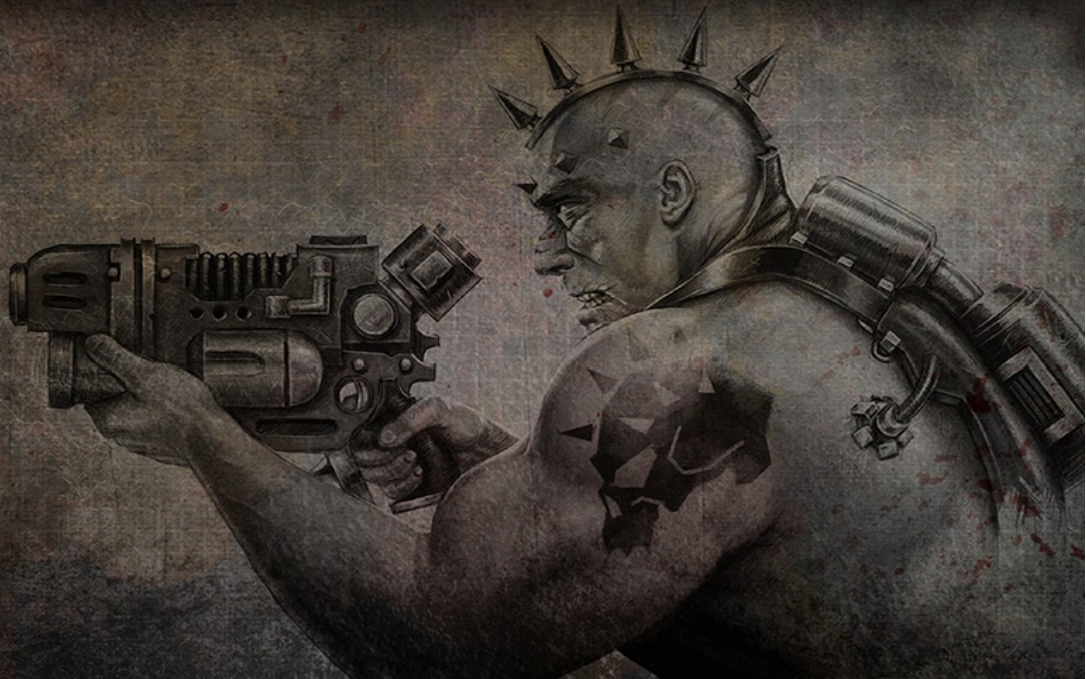
JOSH REYNOLDS



NECROMUNDA

DEATH'S HEAD

JOSH REYNOLDS



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DEATH'S HEAD

Josh Reynolds

Topek Greel rolled his shoulder and drove his fist forward like a piston. Throwing a punch was as easy as breathing for him. As natural as a smile. The impact radiated through his arm and shoulder. His lips split in a wide grin as bone crunched beneath his fist, and his opponent grunted.

The cheering of the slime-barge crew faltered. They crowded the top deck, wagering and shouting. 'Rip his head off, Hurk,' one of them howled. 'I've got a week's pay riding on this!' Despite the encouragement, Hurk staggered, face going slack. He was bigger than Greel, with slabs of chem-altered muscle and a face that was mostly scar tissue. He'd probably thumped more men than Greel knew by name. But Greel was a killer, and he fought to win. Hurk must have seen that in his eyes, because he roared and swung out a hammer-like fist. The punch was wild – desperate. It barely grazed the top of Greel's head and the flat strip of hair that ran over his otherwise bare scalp.

Moving swiftly, he closed in, the stims singing in his veins. The next blow wasn't necessary. Hurk was already down, he just didn't know it yet. His face was going purple from that last punch, and he was wheezing like a faltering pump. But Greel liked things neat. It was untidy to just let a man sag, when you could plant him clean and proper. And he had a point to prove to the audience, to show them he wasn't some soft uphiver.

The crew of the slime-barge had been prodding him since he'd booked passage in Two Pumps, trying to provoke him into wagering on a fight. They'd thought he was just a stimm-rat, fresh from the foundries, too green to be out alone, too stupid not to get drawn into a rigged contest. They'd thought him an easy mark. They were wrong.

His second punch caught the towering crewman in the solar plexus, lifting him

off unsteady feet, and casting him back onto the deck in a heap. The cheering died away as Greel looked around, flexing his hands. On the deck, Hurk moaned, tried to rise, failed. Greel smiled, showing his teeth. He still had all of them, for a wonder. 'I win,' he rumbled. 'Credits – now.' He held out his palm expectantly.

Money changed hands, amid some muttering. No one met his eyes though. That was good. He'd made his point, and earned some scratch in the process. Token chips, bearing the Guilder seal of value, came to him in a pile, and he counted them idly. A bit more than he'd thought. Then, he'd given them good odds. The betting circle broke up, and the unconscious crewman was dragged away. They'd splash him with bilge-brew and wake him up, or toss him over the side, into the slime. It didn't matter to Greel which.

Excitement over, and the crew back at their stations, the slime-barge continued its slow trundle across the scummy waters, belching toxic smoke from its leaking stacks. Greel went to where he'd left his gear and tool-rig near the rail. He'd kept one eye on it during the fight, but even so, he automatically cracked open the cylinder of his stub gun. Fortunately, the bulky slug-thrower didn't appear to have been tampered with. As he snapped it back into place, he fixed his flat, dark eyes on the nearing shape of his destination.

Down Town sat at the bottom of the underhive, below even the slag heaps and thump-shafts of the Orlock. It was a tangled collection of collapsed domes and badly made shanties, riddled with crawl-holes and sump-ducts. It spilled down the side of an effluent-worn shaft, and crept out across the vast, dark sump-lake, fed by rivers of sludge that poured down from far above. Sludge-trawlers scraped the surface of the lake, their crews shouting obscenities at their rivals over static-ridden vox-casters.

It was said that everything and anything eventually ended up in Down Town. Supposedly, you could find whatever you were looking for, no matter how rare or precious. And you could have it, if you were willing to pay the price. That was why he'd come. And he didn't intend to leave empty-handed.

Greel pulled the rest of his gear on with brisk efficiency, buckling snaps and unadorned furnace-plates over his thick torso and wrists. He was a big man, despite his lack of years. Then, House Goliath didn't grow them any other way. Size and strength was what was valued, the courage to use both without regard for consequences. The bravery to take what you wanted, when you wanted it.

Greel did not think of himself as especially brave. Bravery required the acknowledgement of fear. Greel had never felt fear, that he was aware of. It was

a foreign concept, as strange to him as the practices of the Great Houses, high uphive. As strange as the thought of an existence outside the foundries where he'd grown to manhood – or as close as he was likely to get. Life expectancy wasn't high for a valve-jack like him.

One slip, and you were in the Spew. If the super-heated waters of the foundry coolant-flow didn't cook you, the things that lived in them would happily eat you raw, unless you could dissuade them. Instinctively, his hand fell to the spud-jacker hanging from his tool-rig. Like the stub pistol, it was never far from his side. The big wrench was heavy enough to crush a smaller man's skull with one thump. It could also bust the fangs out of a sump-stalker's mouth, if you were lucky, and kept your head.

Greel always kept his head. You had to, working the Spew. You had to see all the variables, before they crept up on you. He leaned over the deck and spat. Variables was a good word. One of his favourites. He kept a list, and added to it when he could. When no one was looking. Valve-jacks weren't supposed to waste time learning things that didn't relate to pressure gauges and the tensile strength of a ring-seal.

He'd been taught his letters by a red-robe – one of the sort who was more apt to talk you to death than set you on fire. The Redemptionist had taught him to scribe and to read some, thinking it might make Greel more amenable to his preaching. Once Greel had learned all that the crazy ratbag could teach him, into the Spew he'd gone, him and his scumming pamphlets. It had been Greel's first killing. There'd been others since, but few as satisfying.

He'd never thumped anyone who didn't have it coming – old Kurland, who'd stolen his best spud-jacker; that lunatic, Orem, who'd tried to thief his stimms; and the sump-fisher, Jaqo. He grimaced, thinking of that last one. Not of the killing itself, but the sloppiness of it. The stimms had been rushing something fierce, eating away at his control. Not a clean kill, that. Too much blood and thunder.

Greel liked things neat. Precise. Valves had to be tightened or loosened exactly, or you got drips and cracks. Either could spell disaster. You had to count the twists, listen to the pulse of the pipes, gauge the temperature. You had to be *precise*. Or else you were dead.

That went double, when it came to a man like Irontooth Korg. Greel leaned on the rail, watching the docks draw close, and thinking of the promises Korg had made. He didn't know what he'd done to draw Irontooth's eye, but the gang-leader had offered him a life beyond the Spew and the foundry, and a chance to

be something more than a disposable cog. An opportunity for a new life in the Steelgate Kings.

The Kings ruled Steelgate. They charged a hefty toll on the constant flow of ore from the slag-pits to the zone manufactories, and all but controlled the loads of processed metals heading in the opposite direction. They beggared local merchants and even took a cut from the Guilders – the price of the Kings' protection. There was always a price.

Greel fingered the auto-rig about his neck. The collar regulated the chems and stimms that kept his body functioning. Once, the foundry overseers had held that leash. Now Korg had it. So far, there wasn't much difference. One master was much the same as another, in Greel's limited experience. But he'd started to wonder if it might be better to have no master at all. Or, failing that, one he chose for himself.

Either way, just as it had been down among the valves, here he was again, doing the dirty work, and not expected to survive what Irontooth had laughingly called his initiation. Either he brought back the man he'd been sent to fetch, or he didn't come back at all. Given who it was he was looking for, the latter seemed more likely. Korg didn't seem to care either way. Maybe it was all a joke to him.

Jaquo had liked jokes too, and ended up in the Spew for his trouble. Greel flexed his hands. He could still feel the way Jaquo's neck-bone had popped. He smiled a thin smile, enjoying the way his scars stretched taut. Every scar was a story – something he'd read in one of the red-robe's books. His books, now. He'd kept them, after their owner had taken the plunge, and stashed them away, where he could plunder their secrets at his leisure.

Not that you got much leisure, working the valves. Not a lot of downtime, when there were quotas to meet. Maybe he'd have more time to read, if he survived his rite of passage. If he found the man they called the Widowmaker.

He'd heard the stories. Every valve-jack and furnace-tender had. Lothar Hex was a legend this side of the Wall. And for good reason. A killer unlike any other. Death on two legs. Some said that even Lord Helmawr himself had deigned to pay the assassin's exorbitant prices, once or twice. No two stories about Hex described him the same way. Greel was half convinced that there was no Hex – just an assortment of unsolved murders, ascribed to a legend. But Irontooth Korg said different, and Korg was in charge.

At least for now.

Somewhere overhead, a vox-caster bawled, alerting the dock-crews that they

were inbound, and interrupting Greel's ruminations. The slime-barge shuddered slightly as its keel scraped sludge-bottom. Smaller vessels gave way grudgingly as the barge bulled past them, nearly swamping their decks. The barge-crew slung heavy anchor chains over mooring posts as the vessel drifted into its berth. Ragged dock workers hurried out of the shanties and sheds that lined the shore, ready to begin unloading cargo.

Greel ignored the swirl of confusion as he thumped down the gangplank. The crews gave him a wide berth. None of them could match him for size, and he waded easily through the swirling crowd of bodies. He knew where he was going. Irontooth hadn't given him much to help him in his search, but he did have a name – a swill-joint called the White Mare. It was past the docks, but still on the shore somewhere. Most of Down Town was these days, after years of hive quakes and natural subsidence. Whole sections of the place slid out over the lake like a scum of wood and metal. New streets had been built to accommodate the erosion of the shoreline. Hundreds of rusted gantries stretched between the tumbledown buildings balancing on sludge-stilts.

Small skiffs navigated the forest of support beams and waste-ducts, fishing the shallows, or cultivating corpse-starch deposits. The air was acrid, lacking the harsh heat of the foundry or the cloying vapour of the Spew. It was cold as well, and damp. Condensation clung to every window, and thick patches of yellowish fungus climbed the sides of every building. The skins of strange things that had crawled up from the deep places hung from walls and over doorways – scabrous and scaly hides that stank of secret places.

Greel made his way through the tangle of streets, pushing through the crowds of merchants hawking cheap wares, and downhivers looking for deals. The gantries creaked beneath the weight of so many bodies, and occasionally swayed in a perturbing fashion. Greel, used to watching his balance on wet metal, moved quickly, pushing his way through the crowds, letting his bulk clear him a path. He peered about, seeking anything that looked like a bar, but found nothing save merchant stalls and cheapjack stills that were little more than a single plank and a keg of something noxious.

He was getting frustrated when he caught sight of the scummer trailing him. He skirted a spoil heap that had spilled across the gantry, and took the opportunity to glance back. A thin man with a chem-addiction twitch, wearing battered leathers and a heavy rebreather. He wore no colours, no sign of any affiliation, but his intent was clear. Greel knew a hunter when he saw one. But where there was one, there were usually more. Greel flexed his hands, and felt the stimms boil in

him.

Mutant rats, feeding on the waste, scattered with raucous shrieks as the second scummer lunged out of a narrow gap between two shacks, fighting knife held low. The scummers, like the rats, were scavengers. Outlaws or just unlucky, they had only what they could take from someone else.

Greel caught the knifeman's wrist and jerked him forward. Their skulls connected with a satisfying thump, and the scummer staggered, eyes unfocused. Greel snatched up his spud-jacker and finished the job his head had started. One blow, and the scummer folded up and collapsed with barely a sound. The first had caught up with him by then, and came in high and fast, knife in hand. Greel spun to meet him. The scummer's wrist snapped as the spud-jacker came down, and the knife clattered away.

Greel caught his attacker by the shirt and propelled him backwards, until the scummer's spine struck the gantry rail. The man groaned, the rebreather giving his voice a mechanical rasp. 'The White Mare,' Greel growled. 'Where is it?'

The scummer cursed and scrabbled at the grip on his filthy shirt. His eyes had been stained yellow by downmarket chems. Greel lifted him easily, the stimms raging in his blood. He had to be careful. If he let them get hold of him, he'd burn out and collapse. Precision was the key – not too much, just enough. 'Show me, or go for a swim in the sludge.'

The scummer squawked, and jerked a panicked glance at the dark, slow-moving waters below. He pointed over Greel's shoulder. Still holding the scummer up, Greel turned. He saw a heavy clapboard building, resting at the end of a nearby offshoot. A crude caricature of a white raft spider had been painted on the sign – a White Mare, one of the mountainous arachnids said to haunt the industrial jungles of Hive Bottom.

Greel heard a hiss of metal on leather and turned back, just as the scummer snagged a second blade from inside his coat with his good hand. Greel dropped his spud-jacker and caught the scummer's wrist. He squeezed until the knife dropped to the gantry. 'Idiot,' he said. With a grunt, he flung the screaming scummer out over the sludge, and turned away. He heard the thick sound of the man hitting the murky water as he made his way towards the entrance to the White Mare, and smiled.

The bar hung off the edge of the offshoot, its rear deck balanced on a precariously constructed extension. It swayed and creaked in the breeze, its sign rattling in a metal frame. Drunks huddled near the entrance, only to scatter as Greel stepped inside. He could hear music that was mostly static emanating from

a cheap-rig vox-system.

The White Mare stank of spilled Second Best, cheap amasec and grease. Something with too many legs cooked on a spit being turned by an elderly Ratskin woman at the firepit in the corner. Maybe half a dozen tables, all occupied. Mostly dock-crew or sump-fishers. All armed, he saw. They all looked at Greel as he entered, and then away. No one would meet his eyes. Satisfaction warred with unease as he turned towards the bar.

The barkeep was a big man, running to fat. He had a round head, and crudely inked tattoos marked one half of his face and both hands. He flashed brown teeth in what Greel thought was supposed to be an inviting grin. 'What can I get for you?'

'I'm looking for Lothar Hex,' Greel said flatly.

The bar went quiet, save for a few mutters. The barkeep swallowed and looked away. 'Don't know anyone called Hex.'

'I was told you'd know where he is.'

'And who told you that?'

'Irontooth Korg.'

'Don't know any Irontooth.'

'You don't know much, do you?' Greel said softly. 'Perhaps you need to be reminded.' He drew his stub pistol, cocked it and pressed it to the barkeep's shiny egg of a head. 'Tell me what I want to know, or I'll paint the back wall red.'

Silence fell. Greel glanced around, noting with some satisfaction that every eye was on him. As tactics went, it wasn't an especially clever one. But sometimes simpler was better. Sometimes you just had to loosen the valve, and let it drip. 'That goes for all of you,' he added. He heard the rustle of weapons being drawn, and his smile widened.

'It's a rare sort of fellow who can smile in the face of death,' someone called out. Heads turned towards the back deck, and chairs scraped as several patrons hurriedly got up and left. Greel lowered his weapon and made his way towards the curtains of rat-hide that separated the common room from the deck. He brushed them aside and bent under the lintel, stub pistol still in hand. It was dim, the only light from a weakly flickering lumen strip attached to the roof beam.

There was only a single table and two chairs. A bottle of Wild Snake stood in the centre of the table with two shot glasses. One of the chairs was occupied by a lean man dressed in stained leathers and a heavy coat. He looked like no one in particular, with the sort of face that slid out of memory as soon as you looked

away. But something about his eyes, and the way he smiled, told Greel all he needed to know.

‘You’re Hex,’ Greel said.

The man motioned to the unoccupied chair. ‘Sit.’

Greel hesitated, but only for a moment. Hex, if it was him, studied Greel for a moment. Then he poured two shots of Wild Snake, and pushed one towards Greel. ‘You have the advantage on me – you know my name, but I don’t know yours.’

‘Greel.’

‘To your health, Greel.’ Hex lifted his glass and knocked it back. Greel sipped his own. Wild Snake was powerful stuff, almost a stimm in its own right. It burned his throat, and he was glad he hadn’t tried to gulp it down. Hex watched him.

‘Not used to the good stuff, then?’ he asked, a slight smile playing across his bland features. ‘Bit stronger than the foundry-juice you’re used to, I expect.’

‘My palate,’ Greel faltered slightly over the word, ‘is still learning.’ Hex’s smile widened.

‘Educated as well. How surprising.’

Greel ignored the insult. ‘Irontooth sent me.’

‘He always does. There’s a fellow who never learns.’

‘He wants to hire you.’

‘He can’t afford me.’

‘You don’t say no to Irontooth.’

Hex frowned. ‘Now, you’re smarter than that, surely.’

Greel set his stub gun on the table. ‘I’m going to have to insist.’

Hex sat back. ‘Maybe I overestimated you.’

‘If I go back without the answer he wants to hear, Irontooth will try and scrag me.’

‘Ah, but I’ll definitely scrag you, if you press the point.’

Greel nodded. ‘One bullet is the same as another.’

‘Fatalism is the sign of a well-ordered mind.’

Greel blinked. That sounded familiar. ‘Guppo Bosch, *The Intricacies of Resignation*,’ he said, after a moment. It had been a little book, with a blue cover. The old red-robe had quoted from it often. Quick to read, even with his limited understanding of the subject matter. Hex nodded, seemingly pleased.

‘How delightful – a Goliath who reads. I’m not sure Irontooth would approve, given what I know of him.’ He scratched his chin. ‘Then, I expect he isn’t aware

of your hidden skill. There's an old Terran proverb about lights and bushels that comes to mind.'

Greel frowned, not understanding. Even so, Hex had hit the mark. Gangers had even less use for books than foundry workers. If Korg found out, he might decide to make an example of Greel. Or he might not. Irontooth could be erratic at the best of times. He tapped the cylinder of his stub pistol. 'Feel free to tell him in person,' he said.

'Why does he want to hire me?'

Greel shrugged. 'He didn't say.'

'I suppose it doesn't matter. I'm turning down his kind offer regardless. I'm discerning in my choice of clients, and Irontooth Korg is not the sort of man I normally kill for.' Hex fixed Greel with a steady eye. His face seemed to shift in the dim light of the deck, and for a moment, he looked like someone else entirely, save his eyes. The eyes never changed, never wavered. Like two black pits, as deep as Hive Bottom.

Greel blinked and looked away. 'Make an exception.'

'I don't think so. Unless you think you can force me.'

Greel felt a chill that had nothing to do with the cold. Hex reached into his coat. Greel resisted the urge to snatch up his stub pistol – he'd only get one chance, if it came to that. Hex produced a deck of cards. 'How many times do you think I've had this conversation?' he said. If he noticed Greel's unease, he gave no sign. He shuffled the deck with one hand, his fingers moving dextrously.

'More than once,' Greel said. His unease increased. This wasn't going the way he envisioned. He began calculating the distance to the edge of the deck, versus that to the door. Counting steps, wondering if he could make it. If he could put some distance between them, he might be able to increase his odds of survival.

'This is the twentieth time Korg has sent one of his boys to demand my presence. Did he tell you that, before he sent you?'

'No.'

'No, of course not.' Hex continued to shuffle the cards, his eyes never leaving Greel's face. 'You might not have been so willing to come then, smart as you are. He keeps sending them, because I keep giving him the wrong answer. How old are you, boy?'

The question caught Greel by surprise. Hex didn't give him the chance to answer. 'It's hard to tell, with Goliaths. The stimms and chems in your system make you look older than you really are. You're old enough to have heard the stories about me though. I'm curious – which is your favourite?'

Greel's mouth was dry. For some reason, he couldn't look away from the cards. His calculations deserted him, and he struggled to come up with an answer. 'Sliding Jak,' he said, finally. It had been the first thing to come to mind.

'Ah. That is a good one. Before your time, I think. I admit, I laid a few red roads through Hive Primus that time. Gideon Drexlar was sitting right where you are now, when I put a bolt-round between his eyes.' Hex smiled, and in the weak light it seemed as if his face were no more than a mask, hiding something awful.

Greel felt a harsh taste at the back of his mouth, and wondered if it were fear, or just the stimms. He cut his eyes to his stub pistol, and knew, even as he did it, that Hex saw. The cards ceased their movement. Hex set the deck down. The sound had a finality to it that Greel didn't like. He licked his lips. 'Are we playing a game?' he asked.

'The only game that matters.' Hex set a finger on the deck, and swiftly laid out a row of cards, face down on the table. 'Twenty times, I've had this conversation with someone like you. I'm bored of it now. At first, I just ignored Korg's messengers. I started beating them after the fifth one pressed the point. Then, I started shooting them. This time, I'd like to change it up a bit.' He began to slide the selected cards around, shifting their positions. 'Let's make things interesting.'

Greel watched the cards. It was a mistake. He should have been watching Hex. He glanced up, and Hex smiled. Greel grimaced, silently berating himself. Hex was toying with him. The thought made him angry, the way he'd been angry at the sump-fisher, Jaqo. His fingers curled into fists. He wanted nothing more than to flip the table, and lunge at the man they called Widowmaker. To smash that hateful smile from his face, the way he'd smashed Jaqo, until his skull had gone soft and folded in on itself.

'What do you mean?' he asked finally, choking back the anger. He needed to keep his head, and anger would only get him scragged.

'I'm going to give you a chance that I didn't give the others. Pick the right card and I'll go with you. I'll explain to Korg face to face that my guns aren't for hire.'

'You'll kill him?' Greel said it more quickly than he'd intended.

Hex paused. 'Do you want me to?'

Greel ignored the question. 'What if I pick the wrong one?'

Hex studied him for a moment, and then shrugged. 'I don't go with you.'

Greel sat back, knowing that it wouldn't be that simple. 'Fine.'

Hex tapped the cards. 'In your own time then.'

Greel leaned forward, but paused. ‘Which card is the right card?’

‘Any card but the wrong one.’

‘And which card is the wrong one?’

Hex gave a feral grin. ‘You’ll know it when you see it.’

Greel’s eyes were drawn to the bottle of Wild Snake. He didn’t know why. In the back of his head, variables were turning over. Eyes still on the bottle, he reached out and selected a card. He slid it towards himself, and flipped it over.

A death’s head grinned up at him. As his fingers touched it, it began to cackle and wink cheerfully, as if in response to some secret jest. He looked at Hex, who shook his head sadly. ‘I told you you’d know it when you saw it.’

Greel went for his gun. Even as he did so, he knew he was too slow, compared to the man across the table. Hex moved so swiftly that he barely perceived it. One moment, Hex was leaning back, the next he had a bolt pistol in his hand, and aimed at a point between Greel’s eyes. ‘Your choices have narrowed to two, Greel. You can try for your gun, and hope you’re fast enough. Or you can run back to Irontooth. You have until I finish my drink to decide.’ Hex lifted his glass and took a slug of Wild Snake, almost emptying the glass. His bolt pistol didn’t waver.

Two choices. Tighten or loosen. Pick the wrong one, and into the Spew you went. Time slowed, stretched and faltered. Greel looked around, calculating the variables. Again, his eyes were drawn to the bottle of Wild Snake. Goliaths valued strength and grit. You had to be tough to work the furnaces and the valves. You had to be quick. You had to know when to back off... and when to take a chance.

Decision made, Greel leaned forward, and pressed his head against the barrel. ‘I can’t beat you to the draw. And I can’t go back without you.’ He closed his eyes, and dredged up another line from the little book with the blue cover. ‘It is not a matter of if, but merely a choice of when.’

He waited, eyes shut, until he heard Hex chuckle.

‘Brave, and smart. Too smart. When did you guess?’

Greel opened his eyes. Hex had put his pistol away and was sitting back, watching him. Greel snatched up his glass and drained it in a single gulp. ‘It wasn’t hard,’ he said, wiping his lips. His hands shook slightly. The stimms, he thought. ‘Why else would you be waiting with two glasses?’

Hex smiled. ‘Very few people think to ask that question.’

‘You work for Irontooth already.’

‘In a sense. I’m more of what you might call a consultant. He pays me a small

stipend to ascertain the worthiness of potential candidates for his... organisation. A clever man, is Irontooth, despite the name. He wants only the bravest of brutes – those who'll try to shoot me, even knowing it'll mean their death. Cowards need not apply. Those who run get a bolt-round in the back and dumped in the lake.'

'And what am I?'

'You... are smart. And that's even worse, by Irontooth's standards.'

Greel tensed.

Hex continued. 'A smart lad like you, you're a danger to his position. Smart lads get airs above their station. Smart lads start thinking they should be in charge. I see it often, down here. Ambition kills a man deader than a bullet.' Hex studied Greel for a moment. 'Do you still want to be a Steelgate King? A petty feudal lord, striding across a tiny kingdom, no bigger than a speck of corpse starch.'

Greel paused. Then, after a moment, he said, 'We all have to start somewhere.'

Hex laughed. It was not a pleasant sound. 'That we do. And where better than here, over a bottle of Wild Snake and some pleasant conversation?' His chair scraped back and he stood. 'I like you. Take this. Show it to Korg, he'll know you passed your initiation.' Hex slid a card towards him. Greel covered it with his hand, but didn't take his eyes from Hex, as the Widowmaker circled the table.

'You've impressed me, Greel. Not many do. And I think you've got a bright future ahead of you.' Hex's fist dropped lightly on his shoulder – a gesture of approbation. 'If Korg doesn't kill you first.' He leaned down, his voice dropping to a harsh whisper. 'You owe me, boy. One day, I'll come to collect.'

Greel looked up. Hex's face had changed somehow. Not a man's face now, but something else, halfway between beast and skull, and Greel hurriedly looked away. When he turned back, Hex was gone.

Hands still shaking, Greel took up the half empty bottle of Wild Snake and swigged from it. As he drank, he turned over the card Hex had tossed him. Another mnemonic death's head, but this one wasn't laughing. Not yet.

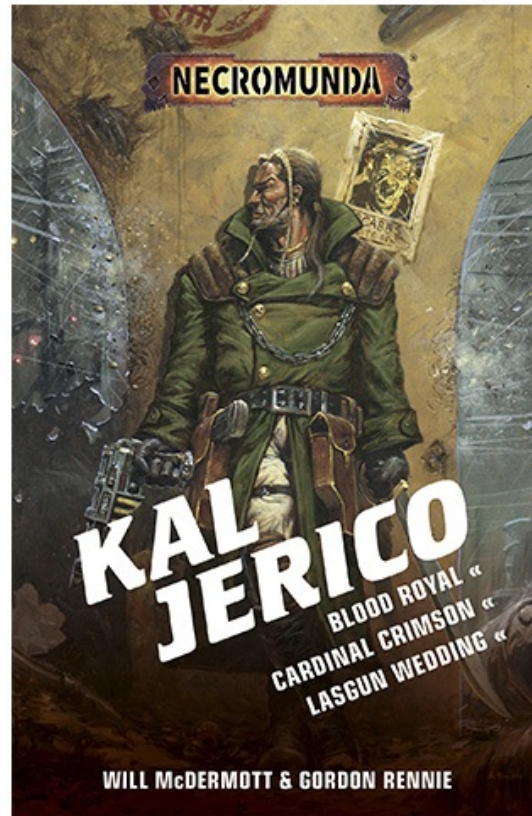
Greel drained the bottle and stood, death's head card in hand, and a head full of variables. It was said that you could find whatever you were looking for in Down Town.

If you were willing to pay the price.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Josh Reynolds is the author of the Horus Heresy Primarchs novel *Fulgrim: The Palatine Phoenix*, the Warhammer 40,000 novels *Lukas the Trickster*, *Fabius Bile: Primogenitor*, *Fabius Bile: Clonelord* and *Deathstorm*, and the novellas *Hunter's Snare* and *Dante's Canyon*, along with the audio dramas *Blackshields: The False War* and *Master of the Hunt*. For Warhammer Age of Sigmar he has written the novels *Eight Lamentations: Spear of Shadows*, *Hallowed Knights: Plague Garden*, *Nagash: The Undying King*, *Fury of Gork*, *Black Rift* and *Skaven Pestilens*. He has also written many stories set in the Warhammer Old World, including the End Times novels *The Return of Nagash* and *The Lord of the End Times*, the Gotrek & Felix tales *Charnel Congress*, *Road of Skulls* and *The Serpent Queen*. He lives and works in Sheffield.

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