

A COMMON GROUND

Mike Brooks

Science-fiction author Mike Brooks has a knack for bringing a touch of humanity to places where it's usually lacking. Compassion and consideration might not be words that are commonly associated with the ruthless gangers of Necromunda, but it's a theme that Mike skilfully explores in 'A Common Ground'.

Goliath ganger Jaxx might be a stim-fuelled pit fighter, but there are many reasons why he steps into the ring. When a mysterious woman offers Jaxx a chance at glory, as well as revenge against his conniving fight master, Jaxx must decide whether it's worth the price of his life.

Krugg threw a punch at his face.

It was a sloppy, looping roundhouse, high on power but low on accuracy or efficiency. Jaxx raised his left arm, took the blow high on his ribs and clamped his arm down on it, then *head, body, head* as he drove his fist home repeatedly. Krugg's nose broke on the second punch to his face, the cartilage giving way with a crunching noise, and he staggered, now blinded by tears. Jaxx kicked Krugg's right leg out from under him, grabbed the back of the other man's head and pulled it down into his own rising knee. Something cracked – certainly a couple of teeth, possibly the whole jaw – and Krugg slumped to the ground, out cold.

The crowd roared.

Jaxx turned on the spot, scanning his surroundings with the expert eye of a professional, assessing his situation. The melee had broken down into a number of individual brawls as fighters squared off with old rivals or new enemies against whom they wanted to prove themselves. Everyone else was still on their feet; Krugg was strong, even for a Goliath, and the crowd loved him, but he was never going to be anything more than a makeweight. He'd never learned how to fight smart, and he'd taken so many blows to the head now the odds were good that he never would. He hadn't been much of a challenge.

The rest of the field, though... They were another matter.

Gugard 'Harm's' Wei was exchanging blows with old Strong-Arm Tym. Tym was losing his hair but not his reflexes; he expertly slipped one of Wei's punches and landed a short hook to the ribs, staggering the Orlock fighter. Grag Greffin had taken Fat Nox off his feet with some manner of trip or throw, and was now sprawled atop his larger adversary, raining

blows down on his head. That didn't look like it should take much longer to resolve, but Nox was so large it would be difficult for Grag to keep him on his back. Beyond them, the tiny form of Malady Kaw ducked a kick from the wild man known only as Kill Wrath; she looked desperately outmatched, but Jaxx knew enough about Kaw to think that contest would be evens at best.

He stole a quick look over at the owner's box, low down and close to the action for the most exhilarating view. There was Drost Khouren, their insincere snake smile spread across their hairless face, their eyes hidden behind glare goggles and their true motives buried beneath layer upon layer of fake laughs and false concern. Khouren ran the most lucrative fights on all of Necromunda, or so rumour had it, and Jaxx could quite believe it judging by the crowd they'd pulled in today. Not just the locals, either, packed up against the wire barriers and screaming for blood. He was sure he'd seen the glittering mask of Scorpia, the infamous poison mistress of Skull Marsh, and the bright yellow coats of some of the Gamma Zone Crew.

And then there were Khouren's companions.

One of them was some uphive nob, a striking-looking spire-type of indeterminate gender wearing the sigil of House Ko'Iron. They had asymmetrically cut, pure white hair that flowed down one side of their head, and a high-collared coat with gold brocade. Khouren's fights would bring the high and mighty down from their gilded palaces, that was common knowledge. The other two were odder still, strange sorts even by the standards of nobles. The man was tall, pale and willow-thin, so slender it looked a strong breath could break a limb. The woman beside him was a study in opposites: not short, but certainly shorter, and she must have weighed at least three times what he did, with skin as dark as Jaxx's own. Both wore sparkling diadems that covered their foreheads, nearly but not quite identical, but while the man's gaze spoke of languid boredom, the woman's was focused and intense.

Khouren was watching him. The impresario hadn't been giving Jaxx his due, he knew that. There was no better contender to Graw Hammerhand, yet Khouren had as good as asked Jaxx to throw this fight, had told him not to even use his stimms.

That wasn't going to happen. Jaxx was going to give this crowd a display

of such violence that the outcry to see him challenge the Hammerhand would be so great not even Khouren could slither aside from it.

He took a quick, three-step run-up and punted Greffin in the head as hard as he could. The other fighter's head snapped sideways and he slumped off Nox into the packed dirt that had soaked up the blood from so many previous bouts. Jaxx picked Greffin up, wrapped his huge arm around the other man's throat from behind and squeezed. He was tall enough to hoist Greffin clean off his feet and hold him there, his legs jerking weakly.

It was overkill, of course, but Jaxx wanted there to be no doubt in anyone's mind about what he was capable of. He held on to Greffin's limp, twitching form until Fat Nox hauled his carcass back to his feet. Then, and only then, when Nox had laid eyes on him, did Jaxx let Greffin drop, staring Nox down all the while.

Nox pumped his stimms and charged.

He had to. The whole crowd had just seen Jaxx save him from a beating. Nox had to show, right here and now, that he was the better fighter, that he hadn't needed saving.

Jaxx's adrenaline spiked, but he didn't hit his own stimms. He had one dose, and he wasn't going to waste it on Nox. He set his feet, drew his right fist back as if to receive the bull rush, and then at the last moment threw himself bodily at Nox's feet instead.

Nox's boot caught Jaxx in the ribs, a sharp flash of pain, but Nox couldn't arrest his momentum: he tripped and landed hard on his face, the breath flying out of him with a stentorian grunt. Jaxx scrambled back up and threw himself onto the other Goliath's back, smothering him. He didn't try to punch; Nox wouldn't feel it. He didn't try to choke; while in the grip of his stimms, Nox could pry Jaxx's arm loose and maybe pull him right off. All Jaxx needed to do was keep Nox down, stay out of reach and let him burn through his stimm rush, then finish him.

Nox braced his arms underneath him and surged upwards with a roar, knocking Jaxx to the dirt.

Jaxx rolled away from the massive boot that stamped down where his chest had been a moment before, then got his legs under him and came up into a crouch. Nox was screaming and foaming at the mouth, his irises nearly lost in the wild whites of his wide eyes. He lunged forwards, fingers outstretched to grab and throttle, but Jaxx erupted from his crouch and

drove his shoulder into Nox's gut with an impact that nearly winded Jaxx himself. For a moment they were locked on a knife's edge of balance, Jaxx's legs straining and Nox's fingers clawing at his back, looking for some form of leverage.

Then, bellowing with the effort, Jaxx straightened his knees and hoisted Nox bodily off the ground over his shoulder. He held the other Goliath there for a second, just to prove that he could, then jackknifed his body and drove Nox down into the dirt again, back first, with Jaxx on top.

The breath exploded from Nox's lungs again, but this time all that followed was a wheeze. His eyes were rolling back, Jaxx saw as he raised his fist. The stimms had burned out; it was always a short hit, and Nox had been running on little oxygen for most of it.

Nox tried to raise his arms to ward off the blows, but he was only half-aware of what was going on now. Jaxx tried to make it quick. He slammed one punch into Nox's face to stun him, then grabbed the other man's head and turned it sideways as Nox flailed limply. One more blow right behind the ear and Nox went still, out cold.

Jaxx pushed himself up. He'd taken two hits to the ribs – the punch from Krugg and the kick from Nox when he'd tripped – but otherwise he was pretty much unscathed. He looked around again.

Strong-Arm Tym was prone and unmoving. Kill Wrath was on his back screaming, one arm bent at entirely the wrong angle. Harm's Wei faced off with Malady Kaw. As Jaxx watched, Kaw darted in, fainted low and then went high, *pop-pop* in Wei's face with a one-two of punches, then jumped up and delivered a flying knee to Wei's jaw. She landed, waited, watched to see how her opponent reacted rather than rushing to press home her attack. Wei staggered back, clearly disorientated, and Kaw slid forwards again.

Wei stumbled into arm's reach, and Jaxx punched him as hard as he could in the back of the head. Wei dropped like he'd been hit with a power maul, and didn't move.

'*Mine!*' Kaw shouted at Jaxx, pointing at Wei with fury writ large on what was visible of her face behind her long, dark hair. She wasn't happy that he'd finished Wei himself.

Jaxx just raised his hands and beckoned her forwards. 'Just Kaw and Jaxx, now.'

Malady Kaw smiled, revealing too-sharp white teeth. She had a tendency

to bite, if she got close enough. Rumour was she'd cooked and eaten a man once, before she'd ended up on the fight circuit.

Jaxx set himself. He wasn't as fast as her, he knew that. He simply needed to be fast *enough*. He could take ten punches from Kaw and still win, so long as he could just land one. His arms wouldn't break as easily as Kill Wrath's, either. The big fight with Hammerhand was in reach, so long as he didn't lose his focus.

Not yet...

Kaw darted in and back, testing his reflexes. Jaxx had a huge reach advantage, but she'd try to make him overcommit, then change direction, possibly slide behind him. He flicked out a jab, a shade slower than usual. Kaw swayed like a blindsnake zeroing in on the heat signature of its prey, rushed him, jinked, landed a kick to his inner thigh and was away again before he could catch hold of her.

'Kaw! Kaw! Kaw!' bayed the crowd.

It stung, and looked good for the fans, but nothing more. She'd need to hit him with half a hundred of those before it would damage his mobility. Jaxx turned to follow her, teeth bared and growling. He wanted her to think he was already frustrated.

Not yet...

'Kaw! Kaw! Kaw!'

Malady Kaw spun on the spot, just out of his reach, arms outstretched and hair flying, playing to the crowd. Then her sharp grin tightened and she moved again.

Now.

Jaxx hit his stimms.

There was the usual instant of silver pain, then the gushing, throbbing red tide that awakened every nerve and stretched every synapse...

...and then a sudden, rushing hollowness that sucked the strength from his limbs. Jaxx staggered, blinking, as the world began to tilt to the right. What...?

Kaw was on him, a giggling flurry of blows, too fast to see. *Pop-pop-pop*, in his face, maddening, *painful*. Everything was on fire, the touch of air on his skin hurt. Kaw's punches felt like thunder hammers landing on his exposed flesh. Jaxx heard himself screaming. He lashed out blindly, overwhelmed by an alien panic, missed completely and lurched sideways.

Which way was up? Where was...?

Kaw was in front of him, jumping off the ground, arms splayed for balance, hair fanning out into a dark halo around her head and the tip of one metal-capped boot flashing towards his face—

Khouden set Jaxx up!

He'd raged at Khouden when the impresario had shown their face in the recovery rooms afterwards. The medicae had backed out, leaving Jaxx to face down Khouden and their minders.

Khouden spiked Jaxx's stimms!

Ah, Khouden had replied, smiling their snake smile, but I told you that you weren't ready. I make the fights, Jaxx, not you. And now Malady Kaw will face Graw Hammerhand, and you can have your redemption arc. Another fight or two, and then if Graw still reigns, you can have him, and you'll have lost nothing. And if Kaw unseats him... Well then. Khouden spread their hands and their smile widened. Then you get to prove that tonight was a fluke. I imagine that will be a popular showdown. Just think of the money we'll make!

Jaxx had bitten back his response. He'd wanted to get up off the gurney, to grab Khouden's neck and squeeze until that smirking, bald head popped right off. He might have tried it as well, despite the minders and their autopistols, but he'd still been suffering the after-effects of the spiked stimms. He hadn't been sure he could even walk to Khouden in a straight line, let alone lay hands on them, so he'd simply ground his teeth, lain back and closed his eyes until he heard the tap-tap-tap of Khouden's shoes departing again, walking back down the hallway through which so many bleeding and broken bodies had been dragged. Not all of Khouden's fights were unarmed, and the losers of those bouts didn't tend to get any sort of redemption, unless the tales of the Emperor's mercy were true.

Now Jaxx lay in the dark, fuming at injustice as the last of the spiked drugs drained out of his system. Fuming at injustice, and questioning himself. Were *his* wins tainted? How often did Khouden intervene? Was Krugg's apparent inability to capitalise on his immense physical gifts just because Khouden paid him off to be an imposing stooge to other fighters? It was hard to believe a Goliath would lose voluntarily, but a living was a living...

Footsteps, in the hallway. Slow, measured, careful. Jaxx sat up cautiously, trying to keep the creak of the bed under him to a minimum. What if Khouren had decided that Jaxx was too great a risk now, that he might try to blow open the crooked operation, or just try to kill Khouren? What if they'd sent someone to see that Jaxx died overnight from 'complications'? Mad Dody Bralle had passed away in her sleep a while back when she'd lost a fight, not long after she'd had a bitter dispute with Khouren about pay, and suddenly that didn't seem quite so innocent.

Jaxx rolled his shoulders, flexed his arms and took an exploratory deep breath. He still felt like he'd taken a full-body beating, but he'd be a nasty surprise for anyone expecting a sleeping target.

The door handle turned. The door began to swing open. Jaxx tensed. He saw the shape of a hand reach through and fumble along the wall...

Fingers reached the activation stud, and the lumen in the ceiling snapped into life. Jaxx's recovery room – sterile, white-tiled, easily cleaned of bodily fluids – jumped into view around him. He blinked in the sudden glare, his heartbeat pounding in his ears.

'Ah, there you are. Excellent.'

The voice was dry and slightly weary, with an accent Jaxx had never heard before. He squinted, forcing his eyes to focus, and brought the speaker into view.

It was the woman who'd been sitting in the box with Drost Khouren.

She edged into the room and nudged the door shut behind her, not taking her eyes from him. She wore a dress: a flowing, lace-edged affair of midnight-purple, with silver details that twinkled like the displays of shadowlight worms and matched the diadem that still adorned her forehead. She held a cane in her right hand, but didn't look to be leaning on it overmuch, despite her weight. In fact she held herself very straight as she studied him, her dark eyes bright in her jowly face.

'Who is woman?' Jaxx grunted, relaxing a little. He wasn't prepared to rule anything out, but this certainly seemed like a particularly unlikely candidate to be an assassin in the pay of Drost Khouren.

'Lady Chettamandey Vula Brobantis,' she replied promptly. She cocked her head to one side. 'And you are? You were announced earlier, but the noise of the crowd quite drowned it out.'

Jaxx bit back a flash of anger. People hadn't even heard his name! 'Jaxx.

What is...’ He groped for what she’d just said, but the unfamiliar syllables slipped aside from his recollection. ‘What is lady doing here?’

She placed her cane in front of her, clasped both her hands together and leaned on it. ‘You can call me Chetta, if that helps. Well, Jaxx, I came here because I thought we might be able to help each other.’

Jaxx frowned. Everyone in Hive Primus knew that ‘help each other’ meant ‘you help me’.

‘How did Chetta get in here?’

‘I have my resources,’ Chetta smiled, revealing a row of blunt, white teeth. ‘Tell me, Jaxx, did you choose this life?’

No harm to that question. Jaxx shrugged. ‘Near enough. Jaxx is no slave. Jaxx’s vat brother lost an arm to the furnaces, can’t work, needs to eat. Jaxx’s vat sister won the right to bear real children, not vat grown, but children need to eat too. Jaxx can make good money by fighting.’

‘I wouldn’t have thought it was a long-term career, though,’ Chetta said mildly.

Jaxx laughed. ‘Chetta doesn’t know about House Goliath. Grow quick, work hard, die young. Burn bright, but fast. Goliaths need rejuvenat to get anything close to the lifespan that other houses get normally.’ He shrugged, and spat on the floor. ‘Does Chetta see much rejuvenat here?’

‘It doesn’t seem a likely place for it, I’ll grant you,’ Chetta said with a wry smile. She tapped one finger on the head of her cane, as though thinking. ‘It’s a strange coincidence, Jaxx. You see, my family too have been... altered, I suppose you might say. Bred and shaped for the benefit of others, over the years. So although our situations may seem vastly different, I think we share something in that regard.’

Jaxx looked her up and down. ‘Someone meant for Chetta to grow like that?’

‘This is a side-effect, you idiot boy!’ Chetta snapped. She stepped forwards, heedless of the immense size disparity between them, and glared at him. Jaxx, bristling at her words, met her gaze and abruptly found himself unsure. Chetta’s eyes were hard, cold and utterly fearless. She could either obliterate him with minimal effort, or was so deranged that she was wholly convinced that she could.

Jaxx swallowed the angry words that danced on the edge of his tongue. Caution sharpened a fighter, prevented them from making stupid mistakes.

Better to assume that Chetta had some ability or resources he didn't know about. Perhaps she was a wyrd? His skin crawled at the thought, but it would fit with her previous words.

'Chetta said something about her and Jaxx helping each other,' he said, keeping his voice level.

'Why do you talk like that, anyway?' Chetta asked, ignoring him. 'What's wrong with saying "you"?''

'Who is "you"?' Jaxx laughed. 'You, Chetta? You, women? You, nobles? You, everyone-who-isn't-Jaxx? Other houses speak sideways, think backwards, walk at angles. Goliaths talk straight and act true. Goliaths have no time for misunderstandings.' He grunted. 'Goliaths have no time.'

Chetta nodded. 'And your apparent aversion to the word "I"?' There surely can't be any confusion about *that*.'

Jaxx shrugged. 'Jaxx won't live long. Jaxx needs his name to be remembered.'

Chetta nodded again, thoughtfully. 'You looked to be doing very well today, Jaxx. You were making an impression, but then something seemed to go wrong. The woman who beat you – Kaw... She was skilled, but you looked to be in trouble before she'd even really touched you.'

'Drost Khouren spiked Jaxx's stimms,' Jaxx growled. 'Drost Khouren wanted Jaxx to lose this fight.'

'That can't be good for a fighter looking to make a name for himself on a limited timescale,' Chetta observed, her dark eyes studying Jaxx's face. 'I imagine you're not happy with them at the moment.'

Jaxx held his tongue. This Chetta had been sitting next to Drost Khouren, after all. There was no reason to incriminate himself in front of her: for all he knew, she could go straight back and tell the impresario exactly what he had said to her. It seemed a ridiculously convoluted plot, but Jaxx knew that other people didn't think as Goliaths did. You couldn't trust them to be straightforward.

'Are you fighting again tomorrow, Jaxx?' Chetta asked when he didn't reply.

'Not scheduled to,' Jaxx grunted. 'Tomorrow is mainly weapons.'

'Weapons?' Chetta raised an eyebrow. 'That fence around the pit... That doesn't look very high. I'd wager a fighter could get over it, if they wanted to.'

‘Could do,’ Jaxx said, frowning at her. ‘Especially on stimms. But a fighter who goes into the crowd will be killed. Better to fight in the pit – that way a fighter might win, and live. Everyone knows that. The fence is only there to prevent fighters going into the crowd accidentally.’

Chetta smiled, the creases in her cheeks deepening as she did so. ‘So if you were to fight tomorrow, with weapons, no one would be expecting you to go over the fence and, say, brutally cut down Drost Khouren as revenge for the game they played with you today? And you would be able to do it?’

Jaxx’s heart started beating faster. He swallowed. ‘No one would expect it. And yes, Jaxx could do it. But why would Chetta want that?’

She stepped in close to him and brought her face so near to his that he could smell her breath. She smelled... dry. And alien.

‘I don’t care about Drost Khouren, Jaxx, but they seem unpleasant enough for me not to shed a tear at their passing. And I certainly wouldn’t want any harm to come to my noble host of Ko’Iron. But the other man sitting with me today, my husband...’ She paused, and licked her teeth. ‘Him, I very much need to die.’

Jaxx just stared at her.

‘He is as guilty as anyone of the manipulation of my family, Jaxx,’ Chetta said, and now there was an edge to her voice. ‘We have two children, Felicia and Ranovel, the only two who have survived, and he’d arranged marriages for them before they were even born, based on *what is best...* not for them, but for our *family*. The same way as my marriage to him was arranged. It is all political, and I will not stand for it. Not for the children who came from my own body.’

‘Chetta is asking Jaxx to die to solve her problem,’ Jaxx growled. ‘Chetta offers nothing.’

‘You’re going to die soon anyway, Jaxx,’ Chetta said simply. ‘You’ve said so yourself. But do this for me and I shall ensure that your death will be quick and painless, and I shall also ensure that your brother, your sister and her children, and her children’s children, should they have any, will never want for anything again.’

Jaxx stared at her. To be Goliath was to fight and claw for what you could get in the short time allotted to you. To have as much as you needed – no, as much as you *wanted* – without effort... That was what dreams were made of. That was the rallying call that dragged the young pups into the

gangs, searching for glory and quick riches. To be able to bestow that upon his kin would make Jaxx's name a byword for greatness. They would never need to endure the searing heat of the furnaces, or take beatings at the whim of people like Khouren. That would be a gift worth dying for. No true Goliath feared their own death, for it would come soon enough no matter what they did; they merely feared wasting it.

Jaxx licked lips that had suddenly become dry with nervous anticipation. 'How? How would Chetta do that?'

Chetta shrugged. 'I have more money than you can dream is possible. I can easily ensure your family are provided for. I could find another way to achieve my ends, I suppose, but my husband being tragically cut down because he was in the way of a raging fighter seeking to avenge an entirely unrelated slight... It would be very hard for that to be traced back to me.'

'Someone might have seen Chetta come in here,' Jaxx pointed out.

'Someone did,' Chetta said with a smile. 'They won't be telling anyone about it. Should Drost Khouren survive tomorrow, they may have to hire a new guard.' She extended a hand. 'But it's true that I will be missed if I stay here much longer. I've made you an offer, Jaxx. Carry out your side of it and I swear on the honour of the house of my birth, the house of my marriage, and on my eye that I shall carry out mine.'

Jaxx hadn't heard that phrase before, but he was increasingly coming to the conclusion that Chetta must be from off-world. Her accent was too strange for anything else.

He'd sought to be remembered, and to provide for his family. That was all Jaxx had ever wanted from life. Drost Khouren had betrayed him once already; the snake couldn't be trusted not to do it again. Next time, perhaps Jaxx wouldn't wake up again afterwards.

Jaxx reached out his hand and engulfed hers.

Khouren hadn't liked it, of course. *Blade fights are dangerous*, they'd said, as though Jaxx hadn't known that, *and you've had no training. You're too valuable to waste like this.*

One fight, Jaxx had demanded. *One fight, today, with proper stimms, or Jaxx walks away from all Khouren's fights, forever.*

Khouren had looked at him for a long time, saying nothing. Then they'd raised where their eyebrows would have been if they'd had hair, pursed

their lips and nodded once. Jaxx didn't bluff, and he'd counted on Khouren knowing that. He'd counted on Khouren figuring that it was better to make what money they could off a stubborn fool than lose them completely. After all, Jaxx had told the truth to Chetta: he was no slave, and could walk away if he wanted to go back to a no-name life in the foundries.

As the doors went up and he strode forwards into the light cast by the strip lumens overhead, hearing the baying of the crowd, Jaxx wondered if Khouren would have doctored his opponent at all. And if they had, would they have made sure that Jaxx would walk away unscathed, or that he'd become a bloody lesson to those who thought they could dictate terms to the impresario?

Jaxx had a cleaver, the shaft a yard long and the head half that, wicked-edged and with a hook on the pole. His opponent, he saw, was a fighter in ragged Cawdor robes, a long knife in each hand. Reach and strength against speed, two weapons and, presumably, some degree of skill. A fight that, in theory at least, could go either way. If Khouren had interfered, they hadn't made it obvious.

The horn sounded. Jaxx's opponent advanced, his knives moving in a whirling defence pattern, the two blades slipping around and between his fingers like dazzling nets of plasteel. He could make it look good, then, at any rate.

Jaxx circled, looking for the right opening. His opponent circled with him, still well out of range, but already looking to stay on the huge cleaver's offside. Jaxx kept moving, ignoring the shouts of the crowd, their screams for blood. They'd get it, when he was ready.

A few more steps to the right, and his opponent's back was directly to the owner's box. Drost Khouren was there, flanked by the Ko'Iron noble on one side and Chetta and her husband on the other. They were right down at the front today, pretty much on a level with the pit floor itself, as close to the action as they could be. Perhaps Chetta had insisted on it.

Khouren was leaning forwards, elbows resting on their knees, chin resting on their steepled fingers, and appeared to be studying the combatants intently, so far as anything could be told with their gaze hidden by their glare goggles. The fence behind which they sat was a chain-link plasteel mesh, the links thin enough not to obscure vision too much but strong enough to take the weight of a heavy body being thrown against them. It

was braced at intervals by solid metal poles, topped with a broad, flat rail of the same substance to further strengthen it, and was perfectly secure... so long as no one tried to go over it. And why would they? All of Drost Khouren's fighters were volunteers. No one came here to run away.

Now.

Jaxx hit his stimms.

There was the usual instant of silver pain, then the gushing, throbbing red tide that awakened every nerve and stretched every synapse, and this time, oh *this* time, it didn't fade but kept on coursing through his body. He was invincible. He was invulnerable.

He was a god.

He charged. His muscles leapt to respond, pushing harder and faster and further than they ever could normally. He flew over the ground, the rush of the drugs reducing the sudden roar of the crowd to a dull whine, but he knew it was there; he knew they were screaming approval and chanting his name.

His adversary's showy guard faltered uncertainly. Jaxx saw the man's pockmarked face distort, oh so slowly thanks to his heightened reflexes, and morph into an expression of terror. To stand and face Jaxx's charge would be to die: even if he drove his knives home, even if he found the jugular, the heart, a lung, the femoral artery, he'd still be dead. The other fighter knew that and scrambled aside, hoping to slip the cleaver's blow, to stay clear of Jaxx's reach until the stimms wore off.

But Jaxx wasn't aiming for him.

He ignored the panicked knifeman, didn't change direction. Beyond the fence, expressions of joyous bloodlust or studious concentration slipped first into confusion, then, on the smarter ones, into fear and alarm. They had mere moments to realise that Jaxx was coming for them, and none of them reacted fast enough.

Jaxx leapt. His momentum and stimm-boosted muscles carried him halfway up the fence, and he grabbed the top with his free hand, hauling himself up through sheer muscle power to get one boot onto the rail. Even stimms wouldn't help him balance there, but all he needed to do was push off again and jump down, right into the owner's box.

'Droooooooooossssssst!'

He landed like the wrath of a vengeful deity, scattering the rich and well-

to-do like a frag grenade amongst sump rats. Screams, screams everywhere. Sheer, blind panic. A sober-suited man in a vaguely military uniform was fumbling a pistol out of a holster, but too slowly, far too slowly.

It was so very easy for Jaxx to swing for Drost Khouren, miss slightly and send the cleaver into the body of the tall, thin man cowering next to them.

The cleaver's edge was good, and it had not just its own considerable weight behind it but the drug-enhanced muscles of a Goliath pit fighter. It smashed through ribs, pulped organs, shattered the man's spine and emerged the other side in a shower of blood and viscera that spattered all over Chetta as she threw her hands up to shield herself.

Khouren turned and dived the other way. Jaxx reached out, grabbed them by the back of their long coat and hauled them back. Khouren tried to wriggle out of the garment, twisting their arms to get away, but Jaxx reached round them with the cleaver and sank the hook into the far side of Khouren's belly.

Khouren screamed, and didn't stop screaming as Jaxx dragged the hook right across them. The bitter stench of offal filled the air.

A gun fired. Sharp, stabbing pains erupted in Jaxx's back as other shots whistled around him. He whirled, dropping the gutted Khouren. The stimm rush was starting to fade, the world was becoming cold and shrunken, but the man who'd shot him had emptied the clip of his autopistol and Jaxx was still on his feet. He raised the cleaver, the weight now dragging at his arm but still usable...

Chetta appeared in front of him. She'd snatched off her diadem – it was held in her left hand – and in the middle of her forehead was...

...an eye?

It opened.

Jaxx blinked at it in shock. Brain numbed by the stimm rush, his body rebelling against the drug withdrawal and the gunshot wounds now bleeding out down his back, he stopped in his tracks and stared stupidly at this terrifying, impossible orb of darkness.

The world seemed to *stretch*, and then Jaxx was everything.

And then Jaxx was nothing.

‘Milady!’

Tomas Thornen stumbled forwards, slamming a new clip into his autopistol. ‘Get back! Get back!’

‘Stand down, Tomas,’ Chetta said heavily, replacing her diadem to once more hide her pineal eye. ‘He’s dead.’

She could have been talking about her husband or about Jaxx, although there would only really be any credible doubt about the status of one of them. Jaxx had fallen backwards, first his sanity and then his very life blasted from him by her warp gaze. She’d promised him that death would be swift and painless, and that was the best she could do. Given that she’d obviously never spoken to anyone who’d actually been killed by it, she couldn’t know for sure.

Azariel Brobantis on the other hand, Novator of House Brobantis and her dear husband, had been virtually bisected by the brute’s weapon. A web of influence and power that encompassed a quarter of the galaxy hadn’t helped him against an enormous man with a sharp axe. It was a lesson worth remembering.

‘Milady, are you hurt?’ Tomas asked desperately.

‘I’m... fine.’ She squatted down by Azariel’s body, traced her fingers down his face. Part of her tenderness was genuine. She’d never loved Azariel, not as she’d heard the emotion described. Sometimes she wondered if Navigators were so far beyond human that they’d lost the ability to love. But he and she had been close, once, until he’d taken to ignoring her warnings and dismissing her concerns.

‘You poor man,’ she murmured, ‘that it should come to this. I told you Necromunda was a lawless place, and that this was a foolish extravagance.’

‘Milady?’

The panic around them was dying down as the rest of the crowd became aware that the cleaver-wielding maniac was dead, or at least not moving. Nearby, others were looking wary for a different reason: Chetta had revealed herself as a mutant, and there would certainly be some ignorant fools who either hadn’t heard of Navigators or viewed that they knew better than the Emperor on the subject.

‘I think it may be time for us to leave, Tomas,’ Chetta said urgently, getting back to her feet and wiping at nonexistent tears, ‘before this

situation breaks down. See if you can find our host – I think I saw him running that way.’ She pointed towards the exit.

She watched Tomas rush off, looking for Adelard Ko’Iron. It was a shame, but he’d have to go. He was a nice boy, but he’d just let his master be killed in front of him, which wasn’t the mark of a good bodyguard, and some form of irrational rage would be expected of her as a grieving widow. She’d warned Azariel about Tomas’ shortcomings, but he’d ignored her. More proof that he really hadn’t been the right person to be steering Brobantis any more.

Chetta sighed and turned away from her husband’s corpse. ‘You can come out now, DeShelle.’

DeShelle DuVoir, Chetta’s personal aide, peered over the back of the seats where she’d hidden the moment Jaxx had come charging at them. The girl wasn’t brave, but she *was* sensible, which counted for a lot in Chetta’s eyes. She was discreet, too, which counted for even more.

‘We need to go,’ Chetta said, heading towards the stairs that led to the exit. ‘But before we leave this planet I’ll need you to find the family of the man who killed my husband. Jaxx, I think he was announced as. Given what’s just happened here, it shouldn’t be hard to track down those associated with him.’

‘And what do you want me to do, milady?’ DeShelle asked. Her eyes were wide and she was clearly shocked at what had just happened, but her training kicked in and she was ready to serve, just as she should be. It would probably help her, to be fair.

‘I cannot risk being held on this planet,’ Chetta said, trying to put the right level of grief into her voice. DeShelle would pick up on either too much or too little, and work out that Chetta hadn’t been either as surprised or as unhappy about Azariel’s death as she should have been. If she realised that Chetta had expected this, much less orchestrated it... Well, ambition was rife in House Brobantis, and personal loyalty went only so far, as Chetta herself had just demonstrated. ‘I just killed a man—’

‘In self-defence!’

‘I am not prepared to take that risk!’ Chetta snapped, then softened her tone. ‘DeShelle, I am a Navigator, and these people are not enlightened. Find the man’s family and pay them off so there is no risk of them calling for an investigation into the actions of the *mutant*.’ She waved a hand

airily. 'Ten thousand of the local currency should suffice.'

'I should imagine so, milady,' DeShelle said in a small voice. She knew the value of the local money, and knew that was a fortune. Chetta did too, but she could pretend that she did not.

'See to it,' Chetta said, glaring at the steps up to the exit as though they had personally affronted her. 'The sooner we can be in the warp and away from this ghastly planet, the happier I shall be. I have a husband to mourn, and I will not do that here, in the place of his death.'

And I have a house to put in order...