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# DEAD DROP

MIKE BROOKS



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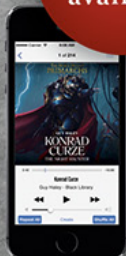


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An Extract from ‘Underhive: A Necromunda Anthology’

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## **DEAD DROP**

**Mike Brooks**

Every piece of cargo that arrived on Necromunda came through the Eye of Selene, which of course was untrue.

Everything legal came through there, certainly, taxed and registered and then shipped off to wherever it was supposed to go. A fair amount of contraband did too, and that was no lie, because the right bribe or piece of appropriately leveraged intimidation could work wonders. But there were some things you just couldn't trust to the tender mercies of Lord Helmawr's representatives, just in case someone got a bit curious and took a peek where they weren't meant to... or, technically speaking, were. For some particularly sensitive things the only real option was to pack it up real good and sling it out of your craft from orbit, aimed at the Ash Wastes. Then you just had to hope the right people got to it first, while the wrong people assumed it was merely a loose piece of space debris.

Danner Grimjack had no idea what it was that had landed eighteen miles north-east of Hive Primus, and they didn't need to know. Nor did they need to know about the finer points of orbital physics, atmospheric friction, or even who had dropped it in the first place. What they knew was that the Steel Crescents had gone haring off towards it as though they were the only gang with a working macroscope to see it come down, which meant it was valuable to someone, and that meant that it would be valuable to Danner Grimjack and the Road Dogs. All they needed to do was wait for the Steel Crescents to bring it back to them.

Which was, agreeably enough, just what was happening.

'Thirty seconds!' Muzz shouted down. Her words were muffled by the

respirators they all wore, but intelligible enough. The winds were low and the toxic ash lay relatively still at the moment, but no one would risk uncovering just for the sake of a little clarity.

Engines coughed into life, and the noise echoed back off the ruined walls of what had once been a space freighter, until some unknown accident had seen it plummet crustwards too, and spill its metal guts across the wastes. Enough of the shell still held together for it to be a landmark on the routes between the hive spires, and most would skirt it on the northern side: you could drive straight through it, but that was a bottleneck just waiting to happen.

Muzz hopped down and landed on the bed of her truck, then stationed herself behind the deck-mounted harpoon. Danner slapped the roof of their own vehicle's cab and it jerked into motion. One by one, the Road Dogs of House Orlock pulled out and, as the Steel Crescents of House Van Saar began to curve around the freighter's ruins to the north, the Dogs did the same to the south.

That was the key; you had to get up to speed out of sight. If you lay in wait and let the quarry go past you, they'd leave you in their dust. Approach them head-on, and they could go anywhere. Hit full throttle and converge on them as they came around a large obstacle, though...

One, two of the Crescents' trucks flashed into sight round the freighter's shattered prow, Necromunda's weak sun spattering off their ramshackle angles, and then the big rig appeared: larger than anything the Road Dogs had, six monstrous wheels churning up the ash as it ploughed along. Big and strong it certainly was, but not the quickest.

Danner had timed it perfectly. Their truck slammed into one of the Crescents' trailing escorts, but Danner, Sideswipe Eddy and Mungles the juve had taken hold of the restraint webbing, and none of them were thrown over. The smaller vehicle was smashed aside, engine block exposed and gushing promethium. It slewed drunkenly, and quickly fell behind.

The pop and crack of lascarbine fire split the air; the last of the Crescents, only a few yards behind, had taken exception to Danner's arrival. Thankfully the speed at which they were all driving, and the unsteady surface of the ash, meant their attempts at marksmanship were dismal. Danner unslung their combat shotgun and took aim with their left hand, still bracing themselves with their right. The Crescents' trucks were

heavily armoured, but no one could do much about their wheels.

A salvo of fire ripped from Danner's weapon. The recoil shook it viciously, but they braced it with the ease of long practice and the shells raked across the vulcanised tyres, shredding them. The Crescent truck swerved uncontrollably, and a moment later it was flipping over. Those riding it might be crushed or might survive; all Danner cared about was that they weren't going to be interfering.

The Dogs were coming under fire from the passengers of the big rig now, but the shots were glancing off the armoured front of Danner's truck. Sideswipe Eddy climbed up into the gunner's chair, largely protected by the fireshield of salvaged metal, angled the harpoon towards them and fired. Muzz let fly with hers at the same moment, and the twin impacts punched deep into the cab. Danner heard a scream: it wasn't just the big rig's body that had been pierced, it seemed.

One of the Crescents' lead trucks was angling away into the dunes to the left, either trying to act as a decoy, or just fleeing. The other had begun to fall back, but the Road Dogs' flankers outnumbered it two to one, and the weight of fire in their favour quickly told. Something punched through and ignited the promethium, and the big rig's last companion went up in a fireball that momentarily lit even the dismal grey of the Ash Wastes.

The big rig itself was veering steadily off to the right. Danner frowned, confused. The steer wasn't irregular enough to be trying to shake the harpoons loose, and they weren't heading for safety any longer. Could the little lead truck now heading in the other direction actually be the one carrying the cargo? No time to worry about that now; they were locked in, and whatever the big rig was carrying would be worth it. It might just be Van Saar tech, but that could still fetch a decent price if you knew the right buyer.

Fast Don and Ironhead both stamped on their brakes and the harpoon cables snapped taut, but although its pace slowed, the big rig powered onwards, dragging the smaller vehicles in its wake. Only one thing for it.

'Board them!' Danner roared, pulling out their cable clip. Sideswipe Eddy reached out and snapped his around the cable, then swung out around the side of the fireshield and let gravity carry him down and along the taut harpoon cable onto the big rig. Danner leaped up to the raised harpoon mount and hooked their clip at the first attempt, then slid down the cable

after him even as Muzz and Toni Bones came down their own line. Danner felt the usual tug of fear as they dangled momentarily above nothing but Necromundan ash, racing away beneath them, but they swallowed it. There were far greater dangers here than a simple fall.

The big rig's escorts were gone, the crew were under attack from two sides, and they were panicking. Sideswipe let rip with his autogun, strafing the big rig's deck, but someone kept their cool. Eddy's head jerked back and he went limp, the handle of a knife protruding from his eye socket. Danner snarled in rage and reached past their crewmate's body, switched their combat shotgun to shredder ammo, and pulled the trigger.

A spray of shot rattled out, scourging the big rig's flatbed at head height to a chorus of screams just before Muzz touched down, and she put autopistol shells through the skulls of the fallen Crescents before she'd even unclipped herself. Eddy's body came to rest on the deck and Danner left it there, drooping bonelessly but still attached to the cable and held up at the waist; easier to get him back aboard when the Dogs were done. Danner unclipped themselves and levelled their gun at the cab, ready for more resistance to emerge from within, but the hatch at the top remained shut.

'Did we kill the driver?' Muzz yelled, pointing at where the Dogs' harpoons had struck. They'd criss-crossed the big rig's deck and plunged into the cab, neatly bisecting where the driver would be sat.

'Looks like!' Danner shouted back. That would explain why the truck was veering off course, anyway. Mungles was already ransacking the corpses of the Steel Crescents around them: an unpleasant job, but potentially fruitful.

The cargo was secured under a heavy canvas in the middle of the flatbed. It wasn't huge – probably about three foot on all sides – but that suited Danner just fine; the smaller it was, the easier it'd be to move. They vaulted up onto the cab and tried the hatch, but it was locked fast from within, so they crawled forward and cautiously peered upside down through the dust-smearred viewshield.

The greying Van Saar behind the controls was not only thoroughly dead, but also impaled upon the harpoon, which had gone right through him and the front wing of the big rig as well. He was pinned in place as securely as a rat on a spit, with his foot on the accelerator; there was no hope of

hauling him out and bringing the vehicle to a halt.

Danner looked up as apprehension squeezed their heart. The landscape dipped ahead, just visible through the grey-tinged air. The ash dunes of Necromunda lay deep, but some ravines were too large to be filled.

‘Unload!’ Danner yelled, dropping back down into the flatbed. They drew and activated their power knife, sheared through the heavy canvas with ease and revealed a dark silver chest, somewhat battered, but still in one piece. Danner, Toni, Muzz and Mungles put their shoulders to it and heaved, scraping it over the flatbed until it dropped into the ash. If it had survived a fall from orbit, albeit in whatever protective structure the Steel Crescents had hacked it out of, it could take a drop of six feet onto ash. ‘Bail out!’

Toni and Muzz jumped. Danner sliced through the cable of their truck’s harpoon with their power knife, freeing Fast Don to veer away, then jumped after them. The ash rose up to meet them, a soft fist that knocked the breath from their lungs as they landed. They sat up, looking around.

Mungles was hacking at the harpoon line of Ironhead’s truck, but the monomolecular blades of his chainsword were having more trouble with the cable than Danner’s knife had. It gave after a couple more seconds, but those seconds had carried the big rig closer to the ravine. Ironhead must have wrenched the wheel of Muzz’s truck hard, because it veered away from impending disaster, but Mungles was still on board the big rig, and without the weight of the Road Dogs’ trucks holding it back, its pace had picked up again.

‘Jump!’ Danner bellowed, getting to their feet and setting off in fruitless pursuit. They saw Mungles grab Sideswipe Eddy’s lifeless corpse and heave it off the back, then bend his legs to jump...

...and the big rig went over the cliff.

‘*Scav!*’ Danner swore, sprinting as best they could over the treacherous ash. It took twenty frantic seconds of running, sucking air through their respirator, to cover the distance the big rig had travelled in a handful. Danner hurdled Eddy’s body and pulled up at the edge of the cliff, sending a spray of ash over it to join the small flood that had been knocked loose and which was now following the pride and joy of the Steel Crescents down into the ravine.

‘Help!’

Mungles was clinging on.

There was an outcrop of rock perhaps ten feet below Danner, and the juve was holding grimly onto it as ash poured down over and around him, but his thick gloves were losing purchase. Danner cursed and pulled the rope from their belt. 'Grab onto this!'

'Can ye hold it?' Mungles shouted back, eyeing the ledge doubtfully as the line slapped down across his shoulder. Losing his grip or no, he didn't seem eager to exchange what little safety he had for a rope that might just pull his boss down on top of him.

Danner took a few steps back from the edge and braced themselves as best they could. They couldn't wait for the rest, judging by the rate Mungles' fingers were slipping. 'Ye grab onto that, or I'll shoot ye meself!'

The sudden weight on the line suggested that Mungles had grabbed it.

Danner nearly went headlong over the edge. They dug their boots in, but the ash was loose and fine, and it was impossible to get any purchase. Given solid footing, Danner was sure they could have taken Mungles' weight, but solid footing in the Ash Wastes was scarcer than honest dice in a Delaque gambling den.

Danner gritted their teeth and held on as they slid inexorably forwards. Their crew had the cargo. Either Mungles lived to take his share, or Danner went over the edge with him and the rest split the bonus.

Five feet from death.

Four...

Three...

Two...

'Boss!'

Two pairs of arms wrapped around Danner's waist and chest, and thank the Emperor, their slide towards oblivion halted. Muzz and Toni hauled backwards, and between them they managed to get enough traction to drag an ash-covered Mungles back over the precipice.

'Ye took one hell of a risk to get Eddy clear,' Danner barked, shaking their shoulders out.

'Crew comes first,' Mungles replied, pushing himself up to his feet. 'Always.'

Danner smiled behind their respirator. 'And that's why I couldn't let ye

go over the edge, kid. Ye know how we do things.’ The trucks were pulling up now, cautious and slow this close to the edge of the ravine. ‘All right, let’s get the goods and find a buyer.’

‘Might be we already know the best place to go, boss,’ Mungles said, and tossed a small, glittering object to Danner. ‘Took that off one of ’em.’

Danner turned it over between their gloved fingers. It was a sigil token; the same size as a credit piece, but potentially far more valuable, for it identified the bearer as acting on behalf of the individual whose mark they carried. It was also potentially far more dangerous, because the grinning skull resting on piles of coin and topped by crossed axes belonged to Caradog Huws, renegade guildler and founder of the infamous Outlaw’s Deep.

‘Boss?’ Muzz asked.

‘Ye did good, kid,’ Danner said slowly, nodding at Mungles. Huws was a big fish, but he was known to pay well and deal fairly, at least with those that dealt fairly with him. Danner would just have to hope Huws wouldn’t take it too personal if his goods were delivered by someone other than those he’d sent out to get them, but that didn’t seem likely. Caradog Huws might not backstab those as hadn’t crossed him, but the meritocracy of the underhive was near-universal: if you got sumped by someone else, odds were they were more deserving than you of whatever spot you had in someone’s operation.

‘Load up,’ Danner said. ‘And keep a weather eye out. We don’t need someone doing to us what we did to the Crescents. We can’t have been the only ones to notice what came down out there.’

‘What’s the heading?’ Toni Bones asked.

Danner grunted, and rolled their shoulders again. ‘Port Mad Dog.’

Of all the towns that had grown up around the Ash Gates – the only (official) ways through the towering external walls of Necromunda’s Hive Primus – the greatest by far was Port Mad Dog. Large enough to count as a city in its own right on many worlds, it was still nothing more than a boil festering at the foot of the titanic man-made mountain: ugly, hard to remove and filled with foulness.

The Spider Ways converged as the different routes approached the hive, and the Road Dogs had fallen in amongst the mighty land trains –

lumbering and slow, but easily capable of crushing their trucks if they steered wrong. Enough ash was being kicked up that the entire world was nothing more than a grey soup, with chains of running lights the only visible illumination. Danner stood tall on their truck's flatbed, as a leader should, but they could see little, and hear nothing over the constant roar of the mighty engines that drove the land trains onwards, while the Orlocks' trucks weaved in and out between them like rodents dodging through the feet of a herd of grox.

When they reached the Ashheap, the dirty sprawl of miserable shanty dwellings made from ash-brick and sheet metal, the Road Dogs left the convoy. The land trains rumbled on towards the massive ore conveyors that would hoist them up to the Ash Gate, but Danner had a different destination in mind, and Fast Don led their little group down a warren of alleys lit only by the occasional lumen, lonely orange beacons the light of which were almost swallowed by the grey gloom. They finally rolled to a halt outside a single-storey building squatting low and wide on the ash, as though hunkering down to prevent itself from being blown away in a storm; which, to be fair, wasn't far from the truth. A sign in Low Gothic, ash-blasted and semi-obsured, was still just legible as reading 'DEENO'S'.

Toni Bones hopped down from the back of Ironhead's truck and leant on the buzzer. Danner, shaking the worst of the trail ash out of their ears, just heard the response.

*'Who's there?'*

'Ye going to keep us outside all cycle, bro?' Toni demanded.

*'Ye not dead yet?'*

'Not yet.'

*'Best ye come in, then.'* A lock clicked and one of the large doors, welded together from metal scavenged from the Emperor knew where, began to swing open under its own weight. Toni grabbed it and hauled it wide, and the Road Dogs' trucks rumbled inside.

Deeno's was a vehicle medicae bay and graveyard; a symphony in metal, promethium fumes and lubricant to the mysteries of the internal combustion engine. Folk uphivive might have a tech-priest or engineer to take their machines to when they stopped working, or had been blown full of holes, but no such sages graced the Ashheap. Here there were only folk

like Deeno Bones, who applied to the problems of others whatever tools he'd stolen or bodged, knowledge gained through trial and error, and a good deal of swearing.

'Good to see ye, bro,' Deeno said, hauling himself up from where he'd been prostrate under something missing a couple of wheels, and engulfing his brother in an oily hug. Once he'd disengaged, he nodded respectfully at Danner. 'Boss. All well with ye?'

Danner sighed. 'We lost Eddy this run.'

Deeno grimaced, and pulled his bandana off his head. 'Ah, rust and rivets, boss, I'm sorry.'

'He knew the risks,' Danner said heavily. 'And we got what we went for. Now we need to get it inside.'

'Not one for the conveyors, then?' Deeno asked, settling his bandana back into place. Danner shook their head.

'We hit the Steel Crescents to take it, and one of 'em was carrying Caradog Huws' token. Gotta be contraband. Doubt Cripplefingers' boys would take a close look, but just in case...' They spread their hands. 'Better safe than sorry, eh?'

'Eh,' Deeno nodded in agreement, then jerked a thumb towards the back of his workshop. 'Well, ye know the way. I take it I ain't seen ye, if anyone comes asking?'

'That's the one, lad,' Danner replied, clapping him on the shoulder. 'Right, crew, let's get this done, then we can come back and give Eddy a proper send-off. Ye all right to look after him 'til then?' they added to Deeno.

'Aye, boss,' Deeno said soberly. 'He'll be safe with me.'

The Road Dogs left their old colleague leaning on the side of Ironhead's truck and looking down at Sideswipe Eddy's corpse, one hand still holding a wrench, and the other resting absent-mindedly on the heavy brace that supported what remained of his right leg.

The tunnels that ran under Deeno's chop shop were neither spacious, well lit, nor particularly fragrant, but they passed clean through the exterior of Hive Primus out of sight and knowledge of those in authority, and that made the unpleasantness more than worthwhile. Deeno could have made a lot more money had he sold the use of them more widely, but that could

have compromised the Road Dogs. Crew came first, always, and it didn't matter that Deeno's leg meant he couldn't run and fight with them any longer. A Van Saar gang might have come up with some fancy prosthetic with flashing lights and whirring bits, and Danner had no doubt that the uphive nobbs would barely be inconvenienced by such a thing, but the Road Dogs didn't have access to such toys. It didn't matter: like the gang itself, Deeno's worth was more than just the sum of his parts. He stuck by them, and they'd stick by him.

The Road Dogs traipsed along through the sludge, the case they'd salvaged resting in a simple covered trolley that occasionally had to be lifted over obstacles. Danner was on point, their combat shotgun ready, for it was doubtful the gang were the only ones to know of these tunnels, no matter how closely they'd guarded the secret. They crept deeper and deeper into the hive, past smells of cooking and sounds of fighting, freezing as a ventilation grate above rang to the heavy tread of footsteps moving in unison, and pressing on hurriedly when distant echoes behind them suggested the presence in the tunnels with them of a large, possibly inhuman body.

They came out in Dust Falls, blinking in the comparatively bright light like Delaques hauled out of a hidey-hole. Danner always kept tabs on where the movers and shakers in the underhive were rumoured to be, and Caradog Huws' name had been mentioned in conjunction with Dust Falls more than once, of late. It was risky ground for him: quite apart from the Palanite enforcers who'd love to get their hands on him, and not to mention his former colleagues in the Merchant Guild, word was that Huws was in the Narco Lord Balthazar Van Zep's bad data-slates too – and that meant it was risky ground for the Road Dogs, but meek hearts made small profits, as the saying went.

Ironhead and Muzz stayed with the cargo, lurking as unobtrusively as possible down an alley, while the rest of them split up to take the lie of the land. Danner didn't know too many folk in these parts, but Dust Falls was where Hive City and the underhive met and merged: it wasn't like the distrustful townships downhive, where outsiders were regarded with suspicion at best, and as an emergency food source at worst. Gossip and goods flowed freely here, at least so long as cash flowed freely in the other direction. Nonetheless, after half an hour Danner had still yet to find

anyone who'd heard a whisper of Caradog Huws' whereabouts; at least, not a whisper anyone wanted to part with in the direction of a hard-faced Orlock leader who might come back and take issue with them if it turned out to be untrue. Danner was just starting to get properly frustrated and angsty about the possibility of having their cargo jacked in turn, when Mungles found them.

'The old meatpacking district,' Mungles beamed, looking pleased as a cyber-mastiff that had bitten a thief. 'No one wanted to be too clear on it, but I heard it from three different folk. Building with a red door, looks abandoned, but ain't.'

Danner clapped him on the shoulder, relief breezing through them. 'Kid, ye're a gift from the Emperor Himself. I've had nowt but closed lips and shrugs!'

'Aye, well I'll remember ye said that when it comes time to share out the spoil,' Mungles grinned at them. Danner frowned.

'Let's not be getting ahead of ourselves. Ye'll get ye fair share, ye've got me word on that, but we need to get our hands on it first. Dealing with Caradog Huws is like playing dice with a witch. We'll need our wits sharp, and enough swagger t'look confident without stepping on his toes.'

'Ye got it, boss,' Mungles said, straightening his shoulders and wiping the smirk from his face. 'Eyes and ears open, mouth shut.'

'That's the one, lad,' Danner said approvingly. 'Now, let's round up the others and see if we can turn a profit on the day.'

They'd had to drag Gunner Harks out of the Six Clans, which he swore blind he'd been working for leads, but Danner smelled the Wildsnake on his breath and had belted him across the face for it. With order restored, the Road Dogs made their way as unobtrusively as possible through the streets of Dust Falls to the old meatpacking district where, sure enough, a derelict-looking building with a prominent red door stood amidst its equally run-down neighbours.

'I don't like it,' Muzz commented.

'How so?' Danner asked.

'It's too obvious,' Muzz said. 'Huws is a wanted man. Why would a wanted man hole up in a place like this?'

'Just because he's a wanted man don't mean anyone's looking for him

here and now,' Fast Don put in.

'The enforcers will be,' Muzz pointed out.

'Maybe he's bought 'em off?' Mungles suggested.

'Ye can't buy off enforcers,' Muzz muttered, darkly.

'Well, it's the only lead we've got,' Danner said firmly. 'If Huws ain't here, we'll take a look in that chest and try to work out who else might be willing to pay for whatever-it-is. I'm not chasing the man all around the blasted underhive. But since we're here, and he might be there, we'll see if we can sort this nice and quick, then go back and honour Eddy proper like.'

Muzz didn't argue further; she'd had her say, and Danner had made their decision. Crew came first, always.

Foot traffic here was sparser than in the main highways, and Danner felt exposed as they pushed the door – which proved to be unbolted – inwards and ducked in off the street. Still, most times, if you looked like you had every right to be doing what you were doing, most folk took no notice.

It was dark inside; there were no lumens lit, merely strips of light bleeding in from outside through grime-stained windows, doing little more than giving edges to the gloom.

'Hello?' Danner ventured. The place felt empty, but they knew better than to judge by appearances. Caradog Huws was a wanted man, as Muzz had pointed out; he'd hardly be holding court just inside the main entrance. All the same...

'I'll watch the door,' Mungles said, and there was the faint whisper of his stub gun clearing its holster.

'Right,' Danner said, fighting down their unease. 'Quick to it then, Dogs. Let's make sure no one's home, and then if there ain't, be on our way afore anyone takes an interest in us.'

They'd taken maybe half a dozen steps, with the rest of the gang spreading out, before the darkness was abruptly pierced by multiple cones of blinding light that pinned the Road Dogs down at their centre.

'HALT!' a distorted voice bellowed. 'PALANITE ENFORCERS!'

Danner tasted bile, but didn't raise their combat shotgun any farther. They couldn't see a target, and while 'shoot for the lights' was a possibility, it would be a desperation move when they were already surrounded. Thinking of which:

‘Mungles?’ Danner shouted, not daring to look over their shoulder, but not daring not to either. If the kid had been hurt...

‘Sorry, boss,’ Mungles replied, his footsteps approaching from behind, and Danner breathed again. One kid with a stub gun was never going to have been able to stop a squad of enforcers.

Except that most of the squad must have already been inside.

‘I really am,’ Mungles added, putting his gun to Danner’s head. The sheer shock of betrayal froze Danner in place as much as the cold metal did, long enough for Mungles to pluck their combat shotgun from their hands.

‘Why?’ Danner breathed, as ugly mutterings rose in the rest of the Dogs. Violence had suddenly got a lot more likely. Enforcers were an occupational hazard, but traitors... well, that was personal.

‘Crew first, always,’ Mungles said flatly, taking a step towards the enforcers and their guns. ‘But you were never my crew.’

The lights shifted, and a dark-armoured figure stepped forwards, their gun levelled at Danner’s chest. It was enforcer riot-issue, well maintained and deadly.

‘What do you know about Caradog Huws?’ the enforcer asked, their voice now at a normal volume, but still distorted by their helmet’s speaker.

‘That he ain’t here,’ Danner spat. ‘Least, unless he’s already been took down.’

‘You might want to share what you know,’ Mungles said, and Danner glowered at him.

‘I told ye, I’ve never dealt with the man before! Owt I’ve heard of him since we got here’s come from the traitor’s mouth!’

‘And the box?’ the enforcer demanded.

‘Not opened it,’ Danner sneered. ‘Could be crystal toothpicks for all I know.’

The enforcer jerked their head, and another one came forwards holding a pry bar.

‘Move back,’ the first enforcer commanded. ‘Failure to comply will be rewarded with lethal force.’

The Road Dogs backed off, grudgingly. Danner watched the second enforcer approach the crate and set to levering the lid off, which they managed in short order. Danner had half-expected some sort of explosion or other booby trap, but nothing of the sort occurred, and of course the

enforcer's full-face helmet gave no indication of what was within. Judging by the way the enforcer pulled out a luminator and shone it inside, they weren't sure what they'd found either.

'Don't tell me it's empty,' Muzz commented bitterly.

The enforcer with the pry bar turned to Danner and beckoned them closer. 'You. Come here.'

'Am I gonna be rewarded with lethal force?' Danner asked.

'Unless you comply.'

'Need to make their bloody minds up,' Danner muttered, but took cautious steps forwards until they stood by the crate. 'Well?'

'What is this?' the enforcer demanded, gesturing at the crate interior. Danner looked at them, then leaned over and peered inside.

'Looks like... slime.' Danner frowned. 'And, uh... I dunno.'

'It looks like eggs, sergeant,' the enforcer said grimly. 'Xenos eggs.'

'Hey, now,' Danner said, raising their hands. 'Let's not get hasty here! Xenos eggs? That's just crazy talk. And besides, there's barely any of those things what *might* be eggs!'

'It's damaged,' the enforcer said, and Danner could hear the uneasiness in their voice even through the distortion of their helmet speaker. The lumen shifted, tracking back the way the Road Dogs had come... and picking out a trail of slime, faint but discernible, from one corner of the battered crate. Danner realised they'd seen it, but had assumed it was leftover from the tunnels; the Emperor knew the rest of them had ended up grimy enough from their journey. 'The contamination is not contained.'

Guns ratcheted, all around them. Trafficking in xenos life forms was punishable by death, by order of Lord Helmawr. Since Danner couldn't give the enforcers any information about who'd sent this, or why, their life expectancy had likely dropped to seconds.

Danner wrenched the pry bar from the distracted enforcer's hands and, turning, hurled it as hard as they could. It tumbled end over end and took Mungles in the throat, dropping the juve in a spray of blood. The Road Dogs raised their guns and began firing: firing blind, firing with determination, firing in the knowledge that they were very likely about to die. Gunner Harks tackled the nearest enforcer to the floor with a howl. Muzz's autopistol struck sparks off armoured plates; Toni Bones fell, one arm nearly blown off by a shotgun blast.

None of them would surrender; none would sell out their fellows in the hope of receiving the enforcers' leniency.

Crew first.

Always.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Mike Brooks** is a speculative fiction author who lives in Nottingham, UK. His work for Black Library includes the Warhammer 40,000 novel *Rites of Passage*, the Necromunda novella *Wanted: Dead*, and the short stories 'The Path Unclear', 'A Common Ground' and 'Choke Point'. When not writing, he works for a homelessness charity, plays guitar and sings in a punk band, and DJs wherever anyone will tolerate him.

An extract from *Underhive: A Necromunda Anthology*.



Ten shells in each mag, manstopper and scatter, sucking sour air through the respirator. Knees bent, crouched behind a half-demolished wall, lost in the shadows cast by a single flickering lumen. The girls all around, similarly hidden from even her view, waiting on the guests that Breen had promised would be coming this way. Once upon a time this hab dome in Necromunda's Hive Primus would have undoubtedly rung to the sounds of heavy industry, but no more. An uncontrollable fire had supposedly broken out, decades or even centuries ago, burning buildings and critically weakening gantries and walkways, and leaving thick mounds of chem-dust and corpse ash everywhere. Even the most unofficial attempts to repopulate it had failed: the atmosphere was still just too toxic for humans to survive in for long. However, the main thoroughfares remained fairly clear, providing a good route along which to move heavy cargo if you didn't mind taking a risk on your lungs.

'Jarene.'

Larina. Barely more than a kid, her face would have still held the plumpness of youth if she'd been eating well enough. As it was, her close-shaved head, pale skin and sunken eyes gave her the look of a skeleton-in-waiting. Could be, for all Jarene knew. Juves didn't eat until the rest of the Wild Cats had taken their fill, and that sometimes didn't leave much. Elena Wild believed in keeping the kids hungry; kept them keen, she reckoned. Keen to prove themselves, keen to get recognition, keen to get a bigger share. And if they died, so what? Plenty more where they came from. There were innumerable Escher girls in Hive City who would view the choice between a future of eighteen-hour shifts in the chem-factories until they died from old age or toxin build-up, or picking up a gun and

fighting their way into legend in the underhive, as no choice at all.

‘What?’ Jarene asked, feeling the warmth of her breath reflected back onto her lips by the mask she wore. She’d been a Larina not so many years ago, when the fights she’d always got embroiled in had started involving knives and the Enforcers had come looking for her. Then it was time to go downhive. Her, Elena and Kay-Kay had started this gang, but Elena had always come up with the best plans.

‘We sure they coming?’ Larina whispered. Her flak vest was too big for her, but it’d do its job well enough. Better too big than too small, as Kay-Kay always said. It just meant that when Larina crouched down, like now, the neckline of the vest rode up to swallow her chin like she was a sump-turtle trying to retreat into its shell.

‘Breen’s not been wrong before,’ Jarene told her. ‘She always know what going down. I’d swear she Delaque, if she didn’t have too much hair.’

‘But—’

‘Hush.’ Jarene dug into a pouch and pulled out half a protein bar. ‘Here.’

Larina fell on it like a ripperjack, stuffing it into her mouth with one hand and chewing frantically. The other hand still clutched her autopistol, because she’d feel the butt of Jarene’s shotgun in her forehead if she put her gun away when they were waiting for visitors. The Wild Cats had no time for those who lacked focus.

A shifting of shadows, a glimmer of approaching light through the fusty gloom, and Jarene felt a tingle run through her body. Not excitement exactly, but not fear either. Expectation, perhaps. Awareness. Awareness that they’d shortly be rich – in that they could eat comfortably for a few days, buy ammo without needing to haggle or prioritise, and maybe snag a few little comforts and luxuries – or, equally, might shortly be bleeding or dead.

She elbowed Larina in the ribs. ‘Eyes on.’

Larina swallowed hurriedly and noisily, and brought her autopistol up. The gun looked huge in her hands, but maybe that was because her cable-thin arms didn’t seem like they should be able to hold it steady. They couldn’t, always, but that was probably just nerves.

The caravan came closer, the beams of luminators marking its progress. Three wagons, Breen had said. Three wagons pulled by two haulage servitors apiece, wired in and non-combat. Two guards to a wagon, plus

the caravan master. Six gun hands, maybe seven, whereas the Wild Cats had nine. Closer to even than they'd have liked, but the payoff should be worth it. Iron ore was the main part of the cargo, apparently, and too bulky to be worth stealing, but there should be aconite crystals too, possibly even ghaast.

Now the wagons came into view. Three of them, as promised. Squat, blocky, ugly things made of sheet metal and rivets, with seats for two guards on top and large, rugged wheels designed to make the best of the underhive's treacherous terrain. Even so, they couldn't take all the paths available to parties simply made up of pack slaves on foot. They'd traded off versatility for sheer volume of haulage.

It made it easy to predict their route. To set an ambush.

The servitors were visible now, plodding mechanically along. No arms, the bar of the yoke passing straight through their sternums, legs replaced by bionics with hydraulic claws for feet to get the best grip through the drifts of underhive dust or puddles of sludge. Jarene suppressed a shudder at the sight of their unthinking gait. Dead-eyed, dead-brained shells of people. She'd rather her body fed the rats and the ripperjacks than end her days as a servitor, no matter what they said about the automatons having no memory of who they used to be.

The caravan reached the spot the gang had agreed on. Jarene sprang up out of cover and aimed her shotgun at the closest wagon, and all around her the ruins of the shanty town suddenly sprouted guns as her sisters responded to the same cue.

'Hold it!' Elena bellowed, training her bolter-needler on the caravan. The guards Jarene could see froze, save for their heads, luminators casting beams here and there as their wearers looked around and realised they'd suddenly become sitting rats. They hadn't been as alert as they should have. Going for a gun would be tantamount to suicide.

The servitors, however, kept plodding. They were incapable of independent thought, and none of their owners on the wagons had given them an instruction.

'She said hold it!' Larina screamed at the still-advancing wagons, her voice edged with panic. Jarene drew in breath to tell the juve to shut up, that they'd stop in a moment, to stay quiet and let Elena handle the talking.

Larina opened fire.

The autopistol went off with a rattle, sending a spray of small-calibre shells at the wagons. Sparks flew and the Wild Cats ducked instinctively as ricochets spanged off into the darkness. A servitor staggered as a hydraulic or important piece of circuitry was hit. Jarene swore and drove the stock of her shotgun into the side of Larina's head, dropping her, but the damage was done.

The guards might have frozen when violence was merely threatened, but they weren't going to just sit still once some freakhead juve had started trying to waste them. They drew their guns and began firing back.

'Down!' White Eye shouted from somewhere off to the left and Jarene threw herself to the ground, landing uncomfortably on top of the semi-stunned Larina. White Eye must have hit her detonator only a second later, because the frag trap the old woman had half-buried in a dust drift went up with a flash and a roar. Jarene scrambled back to her feet, chambering a manstopper round and assessing the situation with an expert eye.

The lead wagon had been tipped over by the force of the blast, its servitors now little more than shredded meat and twisted metal. One of the guards didn't seem much better off, but the other must have been largely shielded by the wagon's bulk, as she'd been thrown clear and was clawing in the dust for her lasgun.

Jarene sighted for half a second, then blew the guard's head apart.

The chatter of autogun fire, the bark of White Eye's shotgun. The cracking hiss of another lasgun rang out and was answered by the distinctive roar of Elena's bolter, to little obvious effect. Then a screaming shadow sprang out of the gloom and bodily tackled another guard from the front of a wagon, down into the dust. Quinne landed atop her victim and raised her crackling powerblade, apparently oblivious to the second guard, whose stubber was now tracking towards the back of her head.

Jarene's heart leapt and she fired from the hip, but her shot went wide. She opened her mouth to scream a useless warning to Quinne and braced herself for the muzzle flash – surely he couldn't miss at that range...

Half of the guard's upper body disappeared as Elena's bolter found its mark this time, and Quinne stabbed downwards to finish off her own opponent without having her brains blown out. Beyond her, the guards of the rearmost wagon were suddenly enveloped in a hissing cloud of gas and

fluid as Kay-Kay's chem-thrower hosed them down. Jarene ran forwards, ignoring the suddenly retching duo. Someone else would make sure they didn't cause any more trouble.

She grabbed Quinne by the bicep and hauled her upright. 'You trying to get yourself sumped?'

Quinne grinned at her, her eyes and teeth points of bright, bloodthirsty mischief in her death's head face paint. 'Knew you'd have my back, Jay.'

Jarene swallowed a sudden surge of bile. 'Elena made the shot. I missed.' It was bad enough that she'd thought Quinne had been reckless. It was worse to find out that Quinne had trusted Jarene to cover her, and Jarene had failed.

Quinne shrugged, apparently unbothered. 'Still alive. All that matters, right?'

'Not even wearing your respirator,' Jarene muttered. In answer, Quinne reached up and tugged Jarene's mask off, causing the straps to tangle in her hair, then grabbed the back of Jarene's head and pulled her in for a kiss. Jarene got a momentary taste of the chalky paste on Quinne's lips that mimicked a skull's teeth, and a brief flash of whatever Empress-forsaken booze she'd had a slug of before they'd laid their ambush, and then Quinne drew back, smiling.

'You worry too much, Jay.'

A door of the nearest wagon slammed open, metal clanging off metal as it hit the wagon's frame, and a hooded shape leapt out. Quinne whirled, her powerblade crackling to life again and her stiletto knife, the twin of the one sheathed at the small of Jarene's back, suddenly in her off-hand and held low and ready. Jarene brought her shotgun up, determined not to fail her partner a second time.

Kay-Kay's shock whip lashed out and wrapped around the hooded figure's throat, arresting its attempted flight. The figure's hands flew up to grab the constricting cord, and in the low light Jarene saw something glinting on its chest.

'Wait!' she shouted at Kay-Kay, but it was too late. Her old friend flicked a switch and electrified the whip, and the figure collapsed into a spasming heap. A couple of moments later the thrashing had devolved into nothing more than twitching, the muscles reacting to the current still coursing through them but the body now dead in all other respects.

Now Kay-Kay shut the power off. Jarene saw her cock her head, her eyes reflecting puzzlement above the lurid designs painted on her own respirator.

‘What?’

Jarene edged past Quinne, avoiding her partner’s powerblade, and knelt down next to the body. She tasted the acrid stench of the remains of Kay-Kay’s chem-blast and clamped her respirator over her face: a blinding headache would be the least of her troubles if she breathed in any more of that, even just wisps of it.

She set her shotgun down and pulled back the robes; heavy, ornate things they were, denoting an individual of considerable wealth and resources, at least by the standards of the underhive. And that wasn’t surprising when she found what she thought she’d seen reflecting the light, the thing she’d most feared to see.

A Guilder badge.

‘Oh, skut.’ Jarene got up and backed away from the corpse instinctively, but uselessly.

‘What is it?’ Elena Wild rounded a wagon, her combi-weapon held ready. The other Wild Cats were appearing now. Everyone seemed unhurt; apart from Quinne they’d all hung back, leaving the guards with nothing but shadows to shoot at. Now Kay-Kay and Sorcha were examining the Guilder’s body, and Jarene heard them both mutter curses of their own.

‘’S a Guilder, boss,’ Jarene told Elena, feeling her stomach twist. ‘We scragged a Guilder.’

Elena’s face settled into the blank mask that Jarene had long since worked out meant that somewhere behind her eyes, the leader of the Wild Cats was screaming in rage.

‘We *what*?’

‘Got a badge,’ Jarene said helplessly. ‘Legit. This a Guilder caravan.’

‘Jacques,’ Sorcha said from behind her, her finger tracing along the Guilder’s badge. Most Escher girls could read to some extent, mainly because those who couldn’t decipher chem-labels tended to die early. ‘Yanai Jacques. Anyone heard of her?’

There was a general muttering and uncomfortable shuffling. No one had, but that didn’t matter. A Guilder was a Guilder, and a dead Guilder meant fast trouble. Lord Helmawr’s Enforcers could be avoided, with some

effort; the Merchant Guild were everywhere, trading the goods that virtually everyone relied on, and for all their infighting they had a zero-tolerance policy on violence towards their members.

‘Why in the name of the Abyss did the kid start shooting?’ Elena demanded, rounding on Jarene. ‘Was s’posed to be a stick-up, not a shoot-out!’

Jarene shrugged. ‘Panicked, I guess. That ain’t the problem now.’ She gestured to the carnage around them. ‘We ain’t hiding this. Even if we ditch the bodies, we can’t lose the wagons so easy.’

Elena glared at her. ‘Yeah, I know. Don’t mean it has to be linked to us, though.’ She raised her voice. ‘Leave the dead, and their stuff. We don’t want to be seen with it. Take what you can carry easy from the wagons, only the most valuable! Rayvenne, Downpipe!’ She pointed at Guilder Jacques’ body. ‘Hide that one, but before you do, mess her up proper. Don’t want anyone to see it was a shock whip what killed her, even if she gets found.’ She hissed in frustration and rolled her left shoulder; Jarene heard the joint click, an old injury from a Goliath wrench. ‘Anyone tell anyone, and I mean *anyone*, that they was coming here to do this?’

The gang shook their heads as one. Loose lips emptied clips, as the old saying went. You told someone outside the gang where you were going or what you were doing, odds were you’d have to fight someone else off your score before you were done.

‘You know there’s one,’ Jarene said quietly.

‘Breen,’ Elena replied, nodding, then turned the movement into a shake of her head. ‘Can’t believe it. She been good, for *years*. Why would she set us up?’

Jarene felt her eyebrows rise in shock. ‘You think she did that deliberate?’

‘That girl the best source this side of Filth Pond,’ Elena said sadly. ‘No way she know about this but not know it a Guilder train. Breaks my heart, but she don’t just decide to sump us off her own back. Someone got to her.’

Jarene nodded. It made a certain amount of sense. ‘What we gonna do?’

Elena licked her lips, like she always did when she was thinking. ‘We’ll tidy up here. You take your girl and go see Breen. Find out who put her up to this – don’t care how you do it.’ She sighed. ‘Then make sure she never

do it again.’

Jarene swallowed, but nodded once more.

‘Get going,’ Elena told her, looking around. ‘I’m gonna go find that kid, see if she can give me a good reason why I don’t scrag her myself here and now.’ She strode off towards where Jarene had left Larina nursing her head.

Quinne came up behind Jarene, slid an arm across her shoulders. Jarene squeezed her around the waist in return, taking momentary comfort from her partner’s warm, solid presence.

‘Tell me again,’ she murmured, ‘about how I worry too much?’


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