

**NECROMUNDA<sup>®</sup>**

# ONCE A STIMM QUEEN

ROBBIE MACNIVEN



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Once a Stimm Queen – Robbie MacNiven

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Robbie MacNiven

*Don't run.*

That was what Jannix had told Sy and the younger gangers before they'd gone in. Unless the word to break was given, do not run. You wouldn't make it out in two pieces, let alone one. As the oldest of the Stimm Queen juves, Jannix had seen it all before, or so she told them. If they wanted to make it through their first bust-up, they had to do what she said.

But Sy ran. It was when the shooting stopped and the booming voice of the enforcer on the hailer vox had gone quiet. It was her only chance, she was certain. They were all going to die here, amidst the sump drains, picked off by the sharpshooters up on the top of the recyc units, or cut to pieces when the lawmen finally made the push to the edge of the drainworks. She could see Karil was already wounded, her shoulder ripped by a grazing man-stopper, crying into her hands while knee deep in raw, stinking Hive Primus effluvium. The rest of the juves, Sy included, were little better off – young, wide-eyed girls with just one electro-tat between them, holding lasrifles and autoguns too big for them, pinned in a shootout during what was supposed to be an easy stimm run.

Necromunda was one bastard of a place to grow up in.

'You'll be fine if you stay down,' Jannix had said, her voice surreally calm. Her expression didn't quite manage to match the words – Sy could see from her darting eyes and the whiteness of her knuckles that the older juve was faking it. She was as scared as the rest of them. That realisation alone was probably the worst thing about the whole predicament. Sy had looked up to Jannix for as long as she could remember, ever more so after she'd sworn the Escher oath and drawn first blood in the name of the House. The older girl had always seemed so sure, so brazen. Nothing from the underhive to the spires could possibly ever

touch her. She always said it was because she *never* hesitated, that to do so in a place like Necromunda was fatal.

*Don't hesitate. Just do.*

Those were the words raging through Sy's mind as the enforcer's guns fell silent. Ducking beneath one of the corroded, mould-blotched sump pipes, she wormed her starved body past a coolant vent, then bolted through the noxious, stinking slurry, east towards the Deadzone.

'Sy, stop!'

Voices screamed, and she heard feet in the sump behind her. She threw a panicky half-glance back – one of the older girls, Cinth, was coming after her.

The older juve didn't get far. There was a crack, and part of Cinth's head disintegrated, her purple mohawk turned suddenly red. She hit the side of the duct with a hideous thump and splashed down into the ooze, disappearing like she'd never existed. Sy ran on, her heart racing, tears stinging her eyes. She wouldn't stop. She *couldn't*.

A routine stimm-run for the Goliaths, a task simple enough for juves, but none of the Stimm Queens had expected a dispersal force of blackplates to be waiting at the handover point. *There were no coincidences in Hive Primus*, that was another of Jannix's sayings. Just what that meant in this particular case, Sy had no idea. Nobody told them anything. It didn't matter anymore. She was out, and she wasn't going back.

Sy slipped under another coolant pipe and was forced onto her hands and knees to work her way through a waste duct. She was barely able to keep her head above the filth, pressed up against the fungus-clogged rockcrete of the duct's top. As centuries worth of polluted filth from billions of hivers lapped against her, she kept her mouth sealed, only drawing breath when she burst from the far side of the pipeline. The inhalation nearly choked her, the stink and urge to gag overpowering.

Still she went on. The memory of Cinth's brain matter exploding flashed behind her eyes, and she half stumbled, a few hanging cables narrowly arresting her fall. If she went down amidst the hive sump, she knew it wouldn't allow her to re-emerge again.

The waste channel she was following turned sharply right. She rounded it. Panting and soaked in freezing filth, she came face-to-plate with a solid block of black plasteel that was embossed with a riveted Imperial eagle. She slammed against it with a grunt and didn't have time to backpedal before it came hammering forward. It forced her into the side of the channel, driving the air

from her lungs. Too late, Sy realised a team of enforcers were using the half-flooded route to work around the flank of the other juves, and she'd just run straight into the riot shield of the lawman on point.

She tried to draw a breath to scream, but couldn't. The figure with the shield – a big, broad man in black flakplate and with a grim half-helm – pinned her against the surface.

'Desist,' snarled a voice. She kept struggling, thrashing in the white-frothed scum, scrabbling at the cold, unyielding metal holding her in place. Her hands darted to her waist, where she had stowed her autopistol, only to find the holster empty. At some point, she must have dropped it. That mistake had probably saved her life.

'Freck off,' she managed to curse at the enforcer. Then a clenched black gauntlet hurtled in from her left. She felt her bones crunch, blood hot and salty on her lips. Her thoughts spun into oblivion.

*Nine Years Later*

'They're late,' Jannix announced, despite the fact she knew Sddie was only half listening.

The Escher was pacing, the stimm den's backroom too small to contain her doubts. There had been no word from any of Strux's mob, or from the juves she'd left as spotters out on the street. The chrono was ticking, and every passing second made it feel more and more like a set-up.

Sddie didn't seem to share her doubts. The first lieutenant of the Stimm Queens was stretched out on the stained mattress in the corner, shock whip wrapped around one leg of the bed frame, obscura stick in hand. Jannix had allowed her to light up on the condition that she stayed out of negotiations to start with. Obscura always made her jaggy, and if the mission failed, Jannix would rather have Sddie swinging in from the back than front-and-centre when the meatnecks turned up.

*If they turned up.*

It had all been going too well. Two weeks and not a single hit in the downhive sectors between Overspill and the Vent Docks. The meatnecks were finally ready to negotiate, and neutral ground in the shape of Madam Almora's stimm shack had been secured for both parties. The only thing missing now was the Overlords themselves.

'Nine years,' Jannix said, pausing to glance out of the back room's open door at the main foyer of Madam Almora's. 'Nine years of wasteful hits and revenge shootings, and now Strux decides not to show?'

Saddie just grunted, the big woman's eyes glazed. Jannix snarled with frustration, fingering the grip of her holstered stub pistol.

Tonight was meant to be the end of it all. The Tarpits sector's feuding would finally have a line drawn under it. The Stimm Queens and the Overlords could go back to splitting the local stim trade, and Jannix could stop cremating the corpses of juves and original gangers alike.

Wasn't it all just too good to be true? The hand vox in Jannix's left hip pocket buzzed. The digi-code belonged to Grima, one of the juves she'd left covering the north-eastern slum approach to Madam Almora's.

*'Trouble,'* the girl's voice clicked over the device. *'There's a blackplate convoy inbound at speed. Two haulers, they've got their riot shields and blast cages up.'*

*'Freck,'* Jannix said. *'I knew this was going to happen. Disappear, Grima. Tell the others to do the same. I'll see you back at the Overspills by the next mid-dark cycle.'*

She hung up, snatched the obscura stick from Saddie's fingers and snapped it.

*'Up,'* she ordered, her voice bringing a degree of focus to the woman's vacant eyes. *'We're out, now.'*

She left the big ganger to rouse herself and hurried through the back room's open door, emerging onto the balcony that ran around the den's central foyer. Below her, the rest of the Escher gang were lounging in various states of oblivion, a few spaced out on the stained mattresses and weaverolls scattered around. The air was heavy; the damp and rot subsumed in a fug of fumes and narcotics that caught in Jannix's throat and made her nose tingle. Cravings scratched at the back of her mind, but adrenaline and nerves doused them. There was no time.

Madam Almora's had once been a well-off overnight stayhouse, back when the Tarpits had been desperately attempting to claw itself up into the semi-respectable neighbourhood category. Now, decades later, the bedrooms turned an altogether seedier profit, while the lounge, foyer and stairwell had become just another recreation hideout for those desperate souls seeking an escape from the nightmare realities of Hive Primus. Most of the clientele had been told to stay away tonight. Madam Almora herself had left after Jannix and the gang had arrived on her doorstep, pausing only to take her cut of the credits she was due for turning her business into a gang-neutral zone for the night. Jannix was beginning to feel as though she was the only one who hadn't smelled trouble right from the off.

*'Everyone up and out!'* she shouted, leaning over the balcony's railing.

‘Blackplates inbound! It’s a set-up!’

The words elicited the desired response. Zara, Lub and the other older gangers were on their feet in an instant, snatching guns and blades, before hustling along the juves who’d allowed themselves to become addled during the long wait. The smoky air resounded with the clatter of weapons being primed.

‘We’re not contesting this,’ Jannix snapped. ‘Break out of the back. We’ll regroup at the Overspill.’

‘It may be too late for that,’ said Shena, emerging onto the balcony from the room where she’d been monitoring the street outside. ‘They’re coming in hard and fast. Already unloading outside.’

‘No one’s going to the cells tonight,’ Jannix snarled, snatching her Maxima IX stub pistol from her waist belt.

The doors at the entrance caved beneath a breaching ram and a hail of shotgun pellets. Stun charges followed, and then the riot shields. Jannix realised it was a standard smash-and-grab, made as though the enforcer sting team outside was just hitting any other illicit sub-spire stumm den. Not as though they were busting a ganger truce.

‘Hit them!’ Jannix barked, still sheltering from the initial stun blast behind a bed frame Saddle had hauled and upended on the landing. She rose and loosed a burst from her stub pistol. Heavy slug rounds zipped into the lingering smoke.

The Stumm Queens lit up the entrance to Madam Almora’s with hard rounds and las. The barrage lacerated the thick black plates of the riot shields that tried to force the entrance. After a few moments of violent, sparking impacts, they withdrew.

The victory was short lived. More gunfire resounded through the rickety old building, this time from directly below Jannix. She recognised the sickly thud of vox legi-pattern shotguns. Enforcers were inside.

‘The back door!’ Zara shouted from the foyer below. ‘They’ve got a team round the back!’

‘Saddle, go,’ Jannix snapped, twitching her pistol towards the stairwell leading downstairs. ‘Lub, Shena, keep your sights on the front doors!’

There was a panicked cry from below – it sounded like Leandra – which coincided with a grating, snarling noise. A scream cut through the gunfire before being abruptly silenced. Jannix felt her blood run cold. Even Saddle had paused at the top of the stairwell, electro whip ignited in one hand.

‘A cyber hound,’ Saddle breathed.

Before Jannix could snap at her, they both heard the pounding of combat boots on the stairs below, and the scrabble of something metallic. Sddie, slowed by the comedown she was suffering from, was too slow to react. A black-plated enforcer cannoned up the stairwell with a shock maul ignited in one gauntlet. The weapon lashed out, cracking across Sddie's flak breastplate and dropping the Stimm Queen instantly. Back arched, her body spasmed violently as the paralysis charged through her.

Jannix's pistol came up in the same moment, preparing for a point-blank headshot.

But she hesitated.

If there was one thing Jannix had learned during a life in Hive Primus, it was that hesitation was a killer. The most dangerous enemy of all. Knife fights, enforcer stings and even underhive brawls with Goliaths, muties or worse weren't the biggest threat to life and limb.

Pausing to think about it all was.

There, at the top of the staircase in Madam Almora's, she wavered for the first time in the better part of a decade. Her finger lay paralysed on the trigger, stub pistol just inches from the helmet of the enforcer who'd raced from the ground floor and eliminated Sddie with their shock maul. Her mind screamed at her to do the easiest thing in the known galaxy – pull the trigger. But she couldn't.

Jannix realised that this moment of doubt, so surreal and breath-taking, would cost her life. Before she could switch her aim, something forced itself past the enforcer's legs, a blur of shot-scarred silver, lens sensors burning red, whirring servo bundles in its hind legs bunched, its vice-teeth dripping. In the heart-pounding microseconds of combat, she realised that even if she atoned for her mistake and blasted the enforcer's brains out, their cyber mastiff would rip her throat to red ruin in the same heartbeat. She was dead, dead right up until the enforcer snapped two terse words.

'Lex. Halt.'

The cyber mastiff came to an instant, juddering stop, its powerful legs coiled to spring, its wicked metal jaws locked open barely a foot from Jannix. The beast let out a low, scraping whine, its primitive machine-spirit clearly eager to rip the Escher to pieces, but unable to disobey its programming.

For a second, the three figures stood locked together, Jannix's pistol just inches from the enforcer's gleaming black helm, the mechanical hound quivering with the energy collected to sink its vibrosteel fangs deep into the gang leader's jugular. Jannix couldn't see her rival's eyes behind the glassy visor, but she

didn't need to. A lifetime of gang warfare had made the situation they both now faced abundantly clear.

'Cease fire!' Jannix shouted, her aim never wavering. 'Stop frecking firing, you stimm-heads!'

It took a moment for her words to carry over the gunshots still reverberating around the building, and a moment more for the Stimm Queens, in the midst of unloading on the law, to obey her. Occasional bursts of return fire continued to rattle from behind the reception counters and from the rear door to the den until the enforcer in front of Jannix spoke into her helmet mic.

'Judge-leader to all units, cease fire. Now.'

The shooting stopped immediately. Jannix kept her stubber pointing at her opponent's head, trying to fathom what had come over her and whether the gut feeling she had could possibly be true.

The sudden silence wasn't helping. The lack of gunfire left behind a gulf that couldn't be filled by the groans and sobs of the wounded, or the deadly hum of the enforcer's shock maul.

'Drop the stubber,' the enforcer said slowly. 'Drop it now and I will file a surrender compliance addendum under your sentence when you stand trial.'

Spoken like a true law-woman, Jannix thought. And yet...

'Sy?' she asked. The pistol still aimed. 'Is that you, little Syren?'

The enforcer stiffened. When she spoke again, her voice had lost some of the steely tone.

'I won't repeat myself. Order your gang members to lay down their arms and submit to the judgement of the law. If you do not comply, I will be left with no choice other than to execute.'

'If that really is you, Sy, you know that isn't going to happen,' Jannix replied. She'd eased her finger off the trigger, though the stubber remained pointed squarely at the enforcer's head. 'If we're not careful, neither of us will walk out of here alive. Very few will, on either side. Talk to me.'

It was the enforcer's turn to hesitate, and Jannix found herself watching an expression that had once been familiar to her – Sy pursing her lips tightly, a sure sign of uncertainty she'd come to recognise in the younger juve. The strange sense of recognition made her pistol arm quiver slightly.

Finally, the enforcer spoke. 'What happened to you, Jannix?'

'I was going to ask you the same thing.'

Sy didn't respond. Slowly, without daring to question herself, Jannix lowered her weapon. For a moment, Sy did nothing, then she abruptly deactivated her

maul, locking it to her mag plates, before carefully reaching up to disengage her helm.

The face beneath was at once familiar and strange to Jannix. Gone was the roundness of youth, the snub nose, the long, purple-streaked hair. In its place was the face of a woman, and a killer, at that – lean, scarred, with cropped blond hair. The eyes though, a deep, dark brown, were the same. The realisation – the memory – made her stomach lurch.

‘We thought they’d killed you back in those sump sinks,’ she told the enforcer. ‘Dumped your body in some chem chute... But I see something far worse happened.’

‘It did,’ Sy said, the agreement taking Jannix by surprise. ‘After the trial, they sold me for adoption.’

Jannix laughed. The sound echoed through the foyer, empty and strained.

‘What? Some upper-spire family? Silkweave dresses and masked balls and handsome off-world traders? Sounds like every underhive girl’s dream.’

Sy growled. ‘They beat me worse than the Stimm Queens did. So I escaped. I ran from them, just like I did from you, Jannix.’

‘And now you’re the one giving out the beatings,’ Jannix said, looking her riot gear up and down. ‘A blackplate?’

‘Permanently reassigned from the Quinspirus Cluster two months ago,’ Sy said. ‘This was meant to be my first solo command. Just a sting on a mid-level stimm savlar dump. We weren’t expecting serious trouble. You weren’t meant to be here.’

‘Neither were you,’ Jannix responded, unable to keep the bitterness from her voice. ‘This was going to be neutral turf. The stimm war between the Overlords and the Stimm Queens was set to end tonight.’

‘Looks like that’s not going to happen then,’ Sy said. ‘Hell of a coincidence.’

‘There are no coincidences in Hive Primus,’ Jannix said quietly.

Sy didn’t seem to hear her – her eyes were elsewhere, and Jannix caught the click of her vox-bead as a transmission came through.

‘Affirmative, stand by,’ Sy said into her mic, then spoke to the Escher once more. ‘Another coincidence. Three truckloads of Goliaths inbound, two from the south and one from the west. They’ll be arriving in five minutes.’

‘Strux is late,’ Jannix said. ‘Too late by half.’

‘If they open fire the way your girls did, they’ll receive the same backlash. There are two good enforcers dead downstairs.’

‘It doesn’t need to come to that,’ Jannix said, smashing the butt of her pistol

into Sy's bare face.

Jannix watched from the first-floor balcony as the Overlords entered Madam Almora's. From communications, she knew one truckload of the meatnecks had surrounded the den, while another entered through the main doors, covered by a krumper rivet cannon and a heavy stubber. Even for Goliaths, she could see that they were armed to their metal-capped teeth. A single glance at their dilated pupils and the sweat glistening from their throbbing musculature told her that most were already high on combat stimms. Brute cleavers, fighting knives and spud-jackers were brandished alongside heavy sluggers, shotguns and stub pistols.

'You're late,' she called down to them. Not one of the brutes replied as they spread out through the ruined foyer. They didn't train their weapons on the Escher, but still, a scent of menace lingered in the air.

Most of it was directed at the enforcers – the blackplates had been disarmed and were being corralled in the entrance room's centre, just back from the booking desks. Their dead lay heaped in the corner by the stairwell, six black-armoured corpses splattered with drying blood. Shena, Nils and Zara stood over them, lasrifles and autoguns aimed at the prisoners. The rest of the Stimm Queens occupied the upstairs, scowling down on the Goliaths with ill-concealed contempt.

'Well ain't this just a sweet surprise,' said a new voice. A fresh horde of Overlords entered the building. In their midst was the largest meatneck Jannix had ever seen – despite half a dozen encounters with the brute, it was difficult not to be shocked by the sheer bulk of Boss Strux.

'Brought us a bargaining gift have you, Jan?' the Goliath asked as he stopped just inside the doors, surveying the enforcers on their knees before him. 'You always were a charmer.'

He moved round the splintered remains of the foyer counters to inspect the prisoners. His pace was the slow, heavy tread of someone supremely confident in his own abilities, relaxed when the nerves of all around him rested on a knife-edge. Unlike the rest of his mob, he hadn't drawn any weapons. His brutal power hammer remained slung across his broad back, while four stub cannon pistols were jammed in the belt and the braces of his shoulder rig. His bare muscles gleamed with oil grease and fresh sweat, his huge frame grotesquely swollen by the growth chems and stim enhancement he was clearly addicted to.

'You knew they were going to sting us,' Jannix snarled. Fighting her urge to

withdraw her pistol, both her hands gripped the balcony's railings as she addressed the Goliaths below. 'You set us up, Strux.'

He let out a bark of laughter, his eyes still on the enforcers as he spoke.

'Nothing personal, Jan.' He bent down to inspect one of the manacled lawmen. The blackplate was wise enough to avoid meeting his eye. 'It wasn't really for your benefit anyway. There's a troublemaker in among this lot. Someone high up in the precinct wanted her dealt with. We both agreed this would be a... unique opportunity.'

'To have us and the lawmen kill each other off,' Jannix said darkly.

'It seemed convenient,' Strux said, moving on to the next enforcer. Sy. 'Ah, sergeant's chevrons. *Here* she is!'

The brute snatched her short hair in one fist and yanked her head back. She glared up at him, one eye swollen and bruising an ugly shade of purple.

'Looks like you've taken a real knock, sweetie,' the Goliath sneered. 'Good news is, your suffering is over. The Overlords are here. We're going to take care of the little problem you pose to Chief Harle and the precinct.'

'Boss,' called one of the Goliaths. He'd approached the heap of dead enforcers and had turned one over with his boot. 'This ain't no blackplate. I know this boy. He's a regular stumm-head, runs the manufactorum lines up Girder Falls way.'

Distracted by the cyber mastiff lying prone and deactivated at Sy's side, Strux appeared not to have heard his underling.

'What's this then?' he demanded. 'You've got yourself a cog hound, have you?'

'Its systems failed,' Jannix called down from the balcony. 'It's scrap now.'

'Don't know about that,' Strux said, placing one meaty hand on its head and rapping its cranium plate. 'I know a couple of tech-riggers in Greasetown that could fix him right up.'

He leaned closer, peering into the machine's lifeless eye-sensors, admiring the blood crusting over the slack metal fangs.

'What's his name, girl?' he asked, looking at Sy. The enforcer held his gaze and, despite her battered face, smiled.

'Lex,' she said. The mastiff's head twitched. Strux stared at it, as though not believing his eyes. He was still staring when Sy spoke the second word.

'*Kill.*'

The hound leapt, a blur of sudden motion and snapping fangs. The mastiff twisted his head as he launched into Strux face-first, clamping his vice-jaws either side of the Goliath's skull. The Overlord had time to scream before the steel fangs tore open his temple and cheeks. A hideous crunch was followed by a

soft, wet squelch, heralding the cracking of his skull and rupturing of his brain. Lex shook his head again, ripping away most of the Goliath's cranium. An eyeball flew through the air and struck Sy's shoulder guard. As blood drenched the floor and the silver workings of the mastiff, the Overlords just stared.

From outside, the sound of gunfire savaged the silence, finally eliciting a response from the two gangs. The Escher were faster though – in an instant, slaughter had returned to Madam Almora's as bullets and lasfire whipped back and forth between the two factions.

Jannix took careful aim with her stub pistol. She used a two-handed brace, relishing the familiar brutality of the weapon's violent recoil as she unleashed a spread of man-stoppers into the broad chest of the Goliath nearest to Sy. The man went down. His dying convulsions released a burst of las that punched dust and plaster from the ceiling.

The enforcers threw themselves to the ground, Sy desperately disengaging her manacles. Jannix watched as she fumbled for the pistols concealed beneath the mattresses scattered across the floor. Outside, the sound of gunfire intensified as more of the enforcer sting team struck.

'More blackplates!' Jannix could hear them bellowing, and more demanding to know where the sudden ambush had come from.

'Whole thing's a set up!' the meathead who'd uncovered the stimmer among the supposed enforcer corpses shouted. 'Dressed their corpses like enforcers. They're working with the law!'

Jannix headed downstairs. The enforcers scattered to cover, but Strux lay where he had fallen, his huge body still spasming as his stim-slugs pumped anabolic-altering doses into him. His face was a bloody, cracked mess. Jannix strode through the gunfire to him and, despite ducking to avoid the bullets and las-bolts whipping by, she paused briefly to gaze down at the remains of the man who had so nearly ruined the Stimm Queens. Then, lip curled in disgust, she put a single round through the remains of the Goliath's head, splattering what little was left of his cranial matter across her face and Madam Almora's floorboards.

A las-bolt thumped into her chestplate, spinning her half around and scarring the neon-yellow flak a singed black. She grunted and dropped into a crouch, reloading as she did so. While Strux may have been reduced to twitching meat, his gang were far from dead. Even as Jannix refocused on the firefight, she saw Lilen be struck by the rivet cannon on the balcony overhead, her flesh and bone pulverised by nails nearly as long as Jannix's own forearm. Her gory remains were pinned back against the wall behind her. To her left, Nils was dancing in

close combat with two of the Goliaths. Her stiletto knife took the eyes and then the throat of one, but Jannix saw the dying brute snatch Nils and restrain her long enough for his gang mate's industrial cleaver to annihilate her left arm.

The two gangs were tearing each other to pieces. Despite it all, Jannix found herself laughing as she opened fire on a burly silhouette cannoning towards her from the gun-smoke. Blood blossomed in the cloying air. Strux was dead, she lived, and there was nothing left to do but revel in the slaughter.

A las-riddled mattress near the reception island caught alight, the flames leaping almost instantly to the splintered remains of the counters. Choking black smoke began to broil through the multi-storey room, and it wasn't long before the bared rafters overhead started to combust too. Jannix unleashed a burst of shots into a Goliath who was trying to flee past the fire towards the front doors, relishing the way the heavy slugs ripped apart his muscled back. He tumbled forward into the mounting inferno with an agonised scream. She could already feel the heat radiating from the centre of the room, making her skin itch and her eyes sting.

'Enforcers, move!' she heard Sy's rallying cry to her team amongst the smog, and the snarling and snapping of her blood-streaked hound as they headed for the rear of the building. Gradually, the gunfire throughout the structure was beginning to lessen as both sides disengaged, driven apart by the mounting fury of the flames.

Madam Almora was going to be due a hefty compensation package.

'Stimm Queens, we're done here!' Jannix shouted, straining to be heard over the roar of the flames. She signalled to those Escher she could still see through the smoke, tearing a strip from her loincloth and holding it to her nose as she made a dash for the back door. Zara and Sddie were with her, the latter carrying an injured juve across her broad shoulders. They raced by the stairwell and down a rear service corridor, vaulting a burning beam that had collapsed in their path, the fire licking at their slender forms. It was almost impossible to see anything anymore – the stimm den immolating in a conflagration that would have warmed the heart of the most pyre-crazed Redemptionist.

There was no time to find more survivors. No time to hesitate. Jannix followed Zara and Sddie out into the neon-streaked shadows of the street.

Despite her instincts, she hesitated. Sddie glanced back, but she didn't look at her. Her eyes were on the door. The few seconds felt like an age, her heart pounding, the heat making her skin prickle. Then she caught what she'd silently been praying for – movement. She kept her pistol lowered as Sy emerged from

Madam Almora's, her cyber hound limping at her side.

The two women faced each other beyond the door, the heat still at their backs, both wary. Lex let out a grating growl, but remained still.

'You'd best make yourself scarce,' Jannix said, glancing from the enforcer to the dog and then up the street after her retreating gangers. 'There'll be all sorts of scum swarming the sector over the next few hours. Fires mean salvage.'

'Backup is inbound,' Sy replied. 'Ten minutes.'

'Took them long enough.'

'I know.'

Jannix could sense the thoughts passing through the enforcer's mind – Strux's gloating had revealed more than a few issues back at the precinct. For once, the thought of the law turning on itself didn't thrill the leader of the Stimm Queens.

'You're going to go back?' she asked.

'Yes,' Sy said, iron in her voice. 'I lost three good enforcers back there, and it's all one bastard's doing.'

'You do realise you can't just walk straight in there and ram a lasgun down his throat? You need to fight smart, girl.'

'I know. It won't be today, and it probably won't be tomorrow, but at some point Chief Harle is going to face a reckoning. Either in the court-dungeons or in a back alleyway, I don't care.'

'Once a Stimm Queen, always a Stimm Queen, right?' Jannix said, smiling.

Sy shook her head fiercely. 'No.' The words coincided with the blare of enforcer sirens in the streets round about. 'Never again.'

Jannix glanced up, then back to the ex-juve. 'So, it'll be business as usual from now on? You're the new law in this sector of town?'

'Something like that,' Sy said, making to move off down the street, Lex clacking at her heels. 'Keep your nose out of the stimms, Jannix.'

'Hey, Sy,' Jannix called after her. The enforcer hesitated, glancing back.

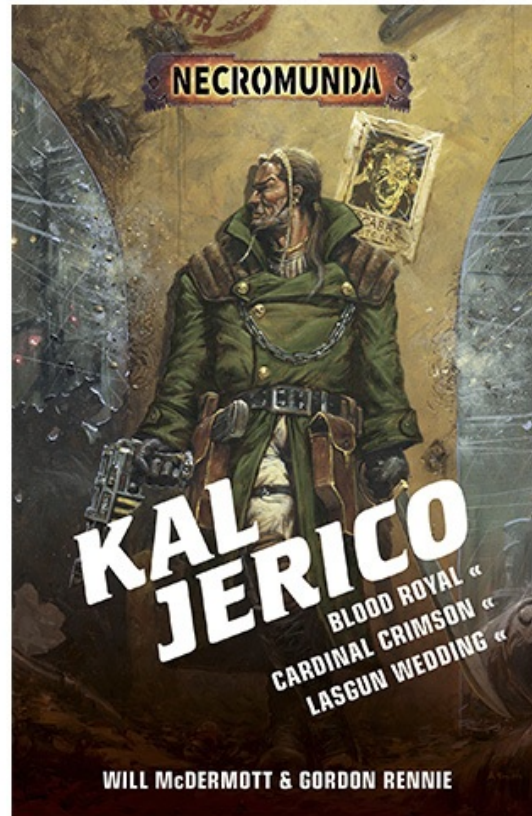
'I'm glad you got out,' Jannix said, offering her a smile.

After a moment, Sy smiled back. 'So am I. Until next time, sister.'

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Robbie MacNiven** is a highland-born History graduate from the University of Edinburgh. He has written the Warhammer 40,000 novels *The Last Hunt*, *Carcharodons: Red Tithes* and *Legacy of Russ* as well as the short stories 'Redblade', 'A Song for the Lost' and 'Blood and Iron' for Black Library. His hobbies include re-enacting, football and obsessing over Warhammer 40,000.

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