

BLOOD ROYAL

The first novel in the Necromunda Kal Jerico series

By Will McDermott and Gordon Rennie

In The heart of a rogue beats royal blood

Meet Kal Jerico: rogue, bounty hunter, swashbuckler and self-proclaimed 'suavest bounty hunter' in the towering urban hell of Necromunda. The illegitimate offspring of the planet's ruler, Kal shunned his royal roots to take up the career of hired gun.

Following a botched job with former rival turned bounty hunter, Yolanda Cattalus, Kal is 'invited' to an impromptu family reunion with his father and is made an offer that he would be very foolish to refuse. To get through this one, Kal has to hope that blood really is thicker than water.



About the Authors

Will McDermott has written two Magic: The Gathering novels – Judgment and The Moons of Mirrodin – as well as eight gaming-related short stories for Wizards of the Coast and Malhavoc Press. The former editor-in-chief of Duelist and TopDeck magazines has also written strategy books for the Magic and Pokémon trading card games, an interactive electronic book for Fisher-Price, a chapter on writing in a shared world for The Fantasy Writer's Companion, and recently co-wrote a Dungeons & Dragons source book. Will lives in Hamburg, New York, with his wife, three kids, and one large dog.

Gordon Rennie lives in a state of befuddled cynicism in Edinburgh, Scotland, where he writes comics, novels, computer game scripts and anything else anyone's willing to pay him money for. In between waiting patiently to become the main writer on the 2000 AD Judge Dredd strip, he spends his time getting into internet flame wars and pretending to be a lifelong supporter of Hibernian FC. He's recently started smoking again,

and so hopes his wife isn't going to be reading this.

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‘Kal! Don't shoot him!’ yelled Scabbs.

Jerico glanced over the edge of the catwalk to see his buddy scrambling up the service ladder. The numerous scabs on the little half-breed's face cast odd shadows that made it look like he was wearing war paint. ‘Why not?’ he called back. ‘Look what he did to my shirt!’ Kal grabbed his sleeve to show Scabbs the rip, tearing the fabric even further in the process. He never should have taken his leather coat off, but it was getting in the way when he climbed the ladder.

‘That was my best shirt,’ Jerico sneered. The thin, balding man pinned beneath his knee squirmed and tried to speak, perhaps trying to apologize, but all he could do was squeak. ‘Hell. It's my only shirt!’

added the bounty hunter. He shifted his weight to bear down on the captive's chest.

'So now I think I'll just put a hole in your only head.' Jerico flipped his two blond braids up out of his eyes and pressed the barrel of his lasgun against the forehead of the mousy little man. He released the safety catch and started to put pressure on the trigger.

Scabbs barrelled into Jerico and the laspistol fired, searing a hole through the metallic ledge and taking a piece of the captive's ear with it. Scabbs and Jerico tumbled toward the edge of the catwalk, both screaming and clawing at the other.

'Don't shoot!'

'What the hell are you doing?'

'We need him!'

'Get off me!'

Jerico felt the edge of the catwalk bite into the small of his back and knew he couldn't stop in time. 'Crap!' he yelled as they tumbled over the ledge. He dropped his weapon and grasped at the ledge with his free hand. 'Hold on!'

Kal's fingers scrambled for purchase as the two men fell in tandem. His hand slapped against a pipe beneath the catwalk and he closed his palm around it as the lasgun clattered and clanged through pipes and cables down to the dome floor twenty metres below.

Jerico's shoulder popped as his torso whipped around beneath the catwalk. Scabbs, arms clenched tightly around Jerico's chest, slipped down to his waist, leaving several streaks of dead skin, as the duo came to a sudden stop. He hooked his fingers into Kal's belt. Above them, Kal could hear his former captive scrambling down the ladder.

'You let him get away!' yelled Kal. He tried desperately to get his free hand onto the pipe.

'I let him get away?' asked Scabbs. 'You were going to shoot him.'

'I was just trying to scare him.' Kal swung back and forth and grasped at the pipe.

'You fired your gun.'

'Only because you tackled me.' Jerico's trousers slipped past his waist and Scabbs began to claw at his partner for purchase. 'Watch it!' yelled Kal. He grabbed Scabbs around the wrist just as his trousers fell to his knees.

'Perhaps you two would like to finish your argument up here?'

asked a familiar female voice from the catwalk. ‘Perhaps with your clothes on?’

Jerico looked up into Yolanda’s brown eyes, which were framed by the Wildcat gang tattoos that ran across her forehead and down both cheeks. ‘This is his fault,’ he muttered. A moment later, Scabbs was pulling himself up a rope, using Kal’s body to push his feet against as he climbed. Jerico followed shortly after. He rolled onto the catwalk and pulled his wayward trousers up as he spun.

When he got to his feet, he saw the squirrely captive trussed up and lying on the grating. Blood oozed from the man’s shredded ear. A nasty bruise blossoming at his temple was just barely covered by thin wisps of hair. Jerico smiled at Yolanda. ‘Good work.’

‘Next time you might want to tie up your informant before you two decide to discuss interrogation tactics,’ said Yolanda.

Jerico’s smile faded. Before Yolanda could react, Kal snatched the laspistol from her holster, and then smiled again. ‘Mind if I borrow this?’ he asked. He knelt down next to the captive and flicked the safety off. ‘Now, you may have heard me say that I wasn’t going to kill you,’ said Kal. He waved the gun in the face of the quivering informant. ‘But that doesn’t mean I won’t shoot you.’

Jerico grabbed the bound man by the wrists and pointed the pistol at his fingers. ‘You might want to unclench your fists and spread your fingers... unless you want me to shoot all of them at once.’

‘Give my troops a day, sir, and we’ll have that murderous son of a bitch standing before you locked in irons,’ said Captain Katerin. His round, red face flushed as he spoke. The sweat that had been beading on his bald head dripped into bushy, black eyebrows.

‘And would I be the bitch in this scenario, captain?’ asked Gerontius Helmawr. The Lord of the Spire lounged in a high-backed leather chair behind an enormous oak desk. There were no windows in this room, and the only light came from an array of lamps on Helmawr’s desk, arranged to keep him in shadow while shining brightly on his staff. The private office was tucked away in the centre of the royal palace, completely shielded on all sides from eavesdropping devices. Long forgotten sound dampening technology made it impossible to hear what was said unless you stood within ten feet of the speaker.

An emergency meeting of Helmawr’s top advisors had been called

to deal with the Armand situation. Six men stood in a semi-circle facing Helmawr in his private office: Katerin, the captain of the royal guard; Vin Colouri, the guardian of the coffers; Morten Croag, Helmawr's top aide in matters of law; Malchi Prong, the chancellor of the Spire; Hermod Kauderer, master of security and intrigue; and the ranking political officer, a somewhat junior official named Obidiah Clein.

The meeting had not been going well. Helmawr's attendants, who stood behind him taking notes, constantly had to remind the lord who the advisors were and why they were meeting. The royal chamberlain would normally run these meetings, but he was no longer able to perform those duties. The resulting chaos had obviously left Helmawr even more confused than normal.

'We're talking about my son... what did you say your name was?'

The military man glanced at the other advisors before answering. 'Katerin, my lord, Captain Katerin.'

'Armand is still my son, Katerin,' said Helmawr. 'He may be a little rambunctious at times, but you would do well to regard him with some degree of civility.'

'Sorry, my lord,' Katerin said, bowing slightly. 'My enthusiasm gets the better of me.' The captain of the royal guard dabbed at his forehead with the handkerchief he kept constantly at hand for this very purpose. The sweat began to flow a bit more freely under Helmawr's stare and even the tangle of beard covering Katerin's face glistened with perspiration. He straightened his uniform before continuing. 'All I meant to say, sir, was that my men are ready to tear apart the Lower Hive searching for your... wayward son.'

'I think, perhaps, a more subtle approach would be in order,' stated Hermod Kauderer. 'Kauderer, my lord. Your master of intrigue,' he added. Kauderer was easily a head taller than everyone in the room and towered over the other advisors, but it wasn't his abnormal height that put people off. His narrow face, piercing eyes and sharp features gave one the impression of staring into the face of a hawk who was about to swoop down and rip out your eyes. 'I have agents in place throughout Hive City and enquiries are well underway. I'm sure we can bring this matter to a quick and quiet conclusion, within the hour.'

'Hah!' scoffed Katerin. 'Your agents could never handle that pit b— Um, powerful son of our lord. They wouldn't last a minute against him in battle.'

‘You assume he would still be standing when my agents got to him,’ said Kauderer. He tilted his head slightly and arched his eyebrows as he stared at Katerin. ‘If your men storm through the Hive, it will result in a blood bath that will make Armand’s indiscretions look like afternoon tea. Discretion is the wise move here.’

‘Those were my men he killed up there, Kauderer!’ stormed the captain. ‘I owe it to them to find their murderer and bring him to justice.’ He turned to Lord Helmawr, and continued. ‘I could lead a small number of men into the Underhive, sire. A simple search and retrieve mission. Very little collateral damage’

‘I can guarantee no collateral damage,’ stated Kauderer. ‘And no witnesses.’ His lips tightened into a thin smile, or perhaps more of a sneer. Kauderer always looked like he was sneering.

The other advisors smiled as well. Colouri even nodded his head at the last statement. Captain Katerin felt his influence in the matter waning. He looked around for allies. Colouri, Croag, and Prong all dropped their eyes to the floor to check on some speck of dust on their shoes. They rarely took sides openly in battles between Katerin and Kauderer. Both men had considerable power and influence throughout the Spire, and that influence grew stronger as Helmawr’s faculties waned, as they most certainly did now, with his mind scattered by recent events and his most trusted advisor cut into pieces. The captain’s gaze fell upon Obidiah Clein, the junior political officer. ‘You agree with me, don’t you, Clein?’

Clein was only present in the meeting because his superior was the recently dismembered Stiv Harper. He was a small, unassuming man with short-cropped hair and a soft, doughy face topped by wire-rimmed glasses. He was about half the girth of Katerin and half the height of Kauderer. This was Clein’s first time in the spotlight of the big office, but if Katerin thought the little man would be easily cowed without the chamberlain around to back him up, he had obviously misjudged Obidiah Clein.

‘From a strictly political standpoint,’ said Clein, pushing the glasses up his nose and looking back and forth at Katerin and Kauderer, ‘I believe both plans are deficient in one important regard. The other Houses...’

The two strong-willed advisors interrupted and tore into the newcomer before turning on each other again.

‘We must show strength in this matter!’

‘My agents will never be seen.’

‘The other Houses must see our resolve.’

‘Agents of the other Houses can be dealt with.’

‘Your agents will never get close to him.’

‘Your men let him escape in the first place.’

‘Your agents couldn’t find their rears with a stick and a mirror.’

‘What will your men do, bleed on him?’

A sudden crash from the desk ended the argument. The advisors all turned toward their lord. The shattered remains of a crystal decanter lay scattered amidst a puddle of liquid on the desk. Helmawr stood, his face impassive, yet with an almost comical smirk spreading across his lips. He still clutched the broken glass handle in his hand. Nobody spoke. Nobody moved. After a moment, Helmawr dropped the handle onto the desk and sat down in his chair. ‘Gentlemen,’ he said. ‘I believe – that man there – had a point to make, and I would like to hear it.’

All eyes turned toward Obidiah Clein, who took a moment to clean his glasses before proceeding. ‘Obidiah Clein, my lord,’ he began. ‘I am the ranking political officer after the untimely... accidental death of the royal chamberlain.’

‘What did you want to say, Mr Clein?’

‘The real problem is not apprehending your wayward son,’ replied Clein. ‘It is more important to retrieve the item he – um – liberated from my predecessor. We need to get the item your son stole, wouldn’t you agree, sir?’

Clein looked at Helmawr expectantly, almost demanding an answer before continuing. Katerin found the tactic brilliant and wished he had thought of it. The addle-brained Helmawr was easily led, if you knew how to guide him.

Helmawr’s response was immediate. ‘Yes. We must recover what my son stole from me, no matter the cost,’ he said. ‘Take care of it, will you, Clein? I feel I must take a nap now.’ With that, Helmawr leaned back in his leather chair and closed his eyes. A moment later, his soft snoring could be heard wafting across the desk.

Katerin dabbed at his forehead as he looked back and forth at Clein and Kauderer. ‘You heard our lord,’ he said. ‘We must retrieve the item, whatever the cost may be.’

Clein strode over to the captain and stood directly in front of him.

‘The problem with a frontal assault is not the casualties you will inflict on the hivers,’ he said, ‘although I’m sure Mr Colouri would not enjoy paying for your little escapades downhive. The problem is that as soon as you pass through the Spiral Gates, every other Noble House will track your every move. It’s too visible, and this matter must be handled delicately.’

‘Exactly,’ said Kauderer. ‘My agents are the epitome of tact. No one will even know they were there.’

Clein turned and sauntered over to the intrigue master. Kauderer glared at the top of the little man’s head. Clein hopped up onto Helmawr’s desk to look at Hermod eye to eye. Katerin was starting to realise that the diminutive man before him was much more than a novice bureaucrat, and that might be dangerous.

Clein glared back at Kauderer. ‘As soon as one of your agents ask a single question about Armand,’ he said, ‘spies from every other Noble House will report back to their superiors and the race will be on to see who can reach him first. Are you willing to bet your life on your spies against the rest of them down there?’

Kauderer was silent.

‘I thought not,’ said Clein. He jumped off the desk before straightening his glasses which almost fell off his face as he descended. ‘That is what we are fighting for here, gentlemen. The information Helmawr’s son has access to could ruin this House – that is, it could ruin us all.’

Katerin knew that he had lost this battle. It was time for a united front. ‘If we can’t send my guards or Kauderer’s agents, then what do you suggest?’ he asked.

‘A third party,’ said Clein. ‘Someone not officially tied to House Helmawr, who won’t raise suspicions amongst the other Houses.’ He adjusted his glasses again and smiled. ‘We’re looking for a criminal hiding out in the lowest reaches of the Hive. I suggest we employ an expert for the task. I suggest we hire a bounty hunter.’

‘Ridiculous,’ said Kauderer, obviously unable to side with Katerin on anything, no matter how sensible it might seem. ‘You can’t trust scum like that. They’re little better than gangers or muties. They’ll turn tail and run at the first hint of trouble, or worse, take our money and then sell us out to the other Houses anyway. We’ll be no better off at all – worse, in fact. My agents will be a step behind whichever House buys

the information.'

Clein just grinned. He had long been ready with the answer to such concerns and, like a true politician, had simply led his counterparts into debating the matter for no reason other than to make himself appear all the more impressive when the time came to impart his own wisdom. 'You see,' he began, 'if my information is correct, I think there is a bounty hunter we can trust.' He was smiling the wide smile of a child who holds the answer to a question that all of the adults have been asking. 'This bounty hunter and Lord Helmawr have a somewhat special relationship,' Clein concluded with a grin.

'Now, isn't this more comfortable than climbing around in the ductwork?' asked Kal.

Jerico, Scabbs, Yolanda and Derindi, the wretched little informant who had nearly cost Kal his trousers, were all sitting at a large, round table in the middle of the Sump Hole, Kal's favourite Underhive dive. It had all the charm of a rat-infested slave pit decorated with trash, only the rats were much larger and carried weapons.

The ropes around Derindi's hands and feet had been removed and the bounty hunters were all smiles. To prying eyes, the scene appeared to be nothing more than a group of friends enjoying a drink.

'I'm a dead man,' moaned Derindi. He stared at the bottle of Wildsnake – a foul, brown liquid in a dirty, brown bottle. Still, it was more expensive than Second Best, so things could be worse. No. They probably couldn't. Even the snake in the bottom of the bottle was staring at him. Perspiration matted what little hair Derindi had left above his ears and his palms were so slick that, when he finally picked up the bottle, it nearly slipped from his grasp.

'Don't be like that,' said Yolanda. She giggled and tossed back the blonde locks of hair that had fallen over her cheeks. But Derindi could tell it was all for show; Yolanda didn't giggle. Not unless she wanted something from you.

The show was for the audience that had been forming at the bar and nearby tables. He noticed the icy edge to her words. 'I stopped Kal from shooting your fingers off, didn't I? We're all friends here.' Yolanda's voice grew suddenly loud on the last line, obviously for the benefit of the surrounding gangers and mercenaries.

'You should have let him kill me,' grumbled Derindi. He dried his

hands on the rough cloth of his clothes before trying to pick up the bottle again. Perhaps the foul liquid would kill him. 'Bleeding to death through a bloody stump would be like dying in bed compared to what'll happen to me if I talk.'

Derindi thought about running. He looked at the door some metres past the bar and wondered about bolting for it, heading further downhive where neither Jerico nor Svend and his gangers could find him. Jerico wouldn't dare shoot him in the back if he ran, would he? They needed him, and even in the Underhive murder is – well it's at least frowned upon, especially in front of this many witnesses. Derindi looked at the bounty hunter, his teeth clenched into a tight-lipped smile as he picked at the hole in his shirt. Jerico was obviously still pissed off about the rip. And then there was the matter of the trousers. Kal was clearly a man fond of his clothing, and Derindi had thus far made an impressive fist of ruining damn near all of it. Derindi decided not to chance running.

'Oh, it won't matter whether you talk or not,' said Jerico with another forced smile. 'Everyone will think you squealed either way.' He reached into his pocket and Derindi flinched, spraying sweat from his chin onto his shoulder. But when Jerico's hand came back out, it was full of tokens and bonds. He picked one bond from his palm and held it up to look at it.

Derindi saw the gangers at the bar ogle at the ceramite piece as Jerico pretended to check its authenticity. Then, with a flourish, the bounty hunter slapped the bond onto the table and spoke in an overly loud voice. 'That's just the down payment, Derindi. You'll get the rest when we get our bounty for Svend. Thanks!'

Kal flicked the ceramite bond across the table at Derindi, who caught it out of reflex before it slammed into his stomach. Scabbs reached out and shook Derindi's hands, his wide smile causing a cascade of loose skin to fall from his cheeks. 'Yeah, thanks, Derindi. You did the smart thing here,' he said out loud. Far louder than was necessary, in fact.

Then, in a softer voice, Scabbs added, 'You're right, Derindi. Don't tell us anything. Besides, all we need to do now is sit back and wait for Svend to kill you, and then capture him while he's digging that bond out of your pocket.' Derindi pulled away from the scabby bounty hunter, and immediately noticed that the ceramite piece was no longer in his

hand. Scabbs's smile looked more sincere now.

Yolanda leaned in toward Derindi. 'Or you can tell us where to find Svend right now, and maybe we'll get to him before he gets to you.'

'Maybe,' said Jerico. He picked at the hole in his shirt again. 'Maybe.'

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