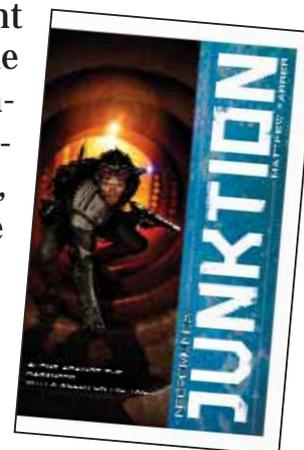


JUNKTION

A Necromunda novel by Matthew Farrer

Hive World Necromunda. The trading settlement of Junktion is reeling from recent raids by the authorities from the uphive. As the former boomtown starts to come apart in the face of water-riots and greedy politicking by the town fathers, lamplighter Sinden Kass gets sucked into the turmoil against his will. Kass soon realises that there are times when you can't just put your head down and mind your own business, not if you want to live with yourself.

And, if that's not bad enough, someone's murdering his fellow lamplighters.



Born in 1970, Matthew Farrer has spent most of the subsequent period in and around Canberra, Australia, and is a member of the Canberra Speculative Fiction Guild. He has been writing since his teens, although he didn't break into professional sales until 'Badlands Skelter's Downhive Monster Show' appeared in Inferno! a few years ago. Since then he has published the Shira Calpurnia novels Crossfire and Legacy as well as a number of short stories. He was shortlisted for an Aurealis Award in 2001. Junktion is his third novel.

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from JUNKTION

FOR ME IT all begins with one single, knife-sharp memory that hasn't ever begun to fade.

It was in the middle of what Junktion people these days call the Dry Season, and I remember it all. I remember the slogans in that lurid green paint, that seemed to be everywhere you turned. And the tattered bodies of Garm Heliko's rebels over the Greimplatz, while Yellow Jancy sat underneath and laughed up at them. I remember looking into the dead eyes of the Escher girl lying in the muck of the puffball forest by the Shining Falls trail, with scavvies yelping and howling all around us. I remember the Steelheads and the Firebrands, the burning at Mirror-Bitten, Brother Hetch. Sometimes when I can't sleep I remember the sound of rats' feet on hollow metal ducts, or carrion-bat wings in among the gantries under Walking Man.

And I remember sweat and sharp, acid air. The noise of the winch. Brass armour shining in the stablight beam and Sebyo saying 'hey you two, what's coming down? You see that?'

We were in the number-four Winchrest, right on the end of a snapped-off girder sticking out into the Well. The winchboys had thought that there was a problem with the juice tap that fed the winches and the big pintle stablight. There wasn't, but it had taken me more than an hour of sweaty, nail-biting work to find that out, crawling up and down the girder trying to ignore that space all around and above me and the great big drop down to the Junktion rooftops. I'm an Underhiver, I like my tunnels and crawlways and boltholes, and when I'm out in open space like that I keep thinking I can feel the empty air plucking at me with little invisible fingers.

And of course the real problem was just that the cowl over the cable-join was loose and the juicewire had grown a coat of green rust-rot. If I'd known that at the start I could have spliced it in ten minutes and be back on the winch-carriage (and if you think standing on a catwalk is bad, try riding in one of those rat-spat things), on my way to a firm Underhive floor and knock-off for the day. Sebyo and Backni were fussing over the signal lamps and pretending not to notice how angry I was.

'Hey you two, what's coming down? You see that?'

I didn't and I didn't care. Keeping the panniers moving was their business, not mine. It took a minute for me to realise that Backni was standing motionless a double armlength away from me, staring upward, mouth open.

What kind of spider? Junktion paid its trappers well to make sure that the spiders and carrion-bats and ripperjacks never got near the Well, but someone had slipped up. That was my first thought.

There were cables dropping down the Well all around us. Sebyo panned the pintle-light around and we saw two, three, four, half a dozen, a dozen more. The other winchnests had seen them too and all the crews were shining lights around. The lines flashed pale in the crisscrossing beams. They hung almost vertical, only swaying a little. There wasn't much movement in the air that day. What kind of spider lowered a trapline straight down like that?

Not spiders. Now I saw what Sebyo had seen. A flash of movement. High up. One of the stablight beams hitting metal. Never saw a spider that colour. . Human shapes, clipped to the hanging lines, coming down all the lines at a smooth even speed.

There were calls from each nest they passed, and of course we were too surprised and stupid to work out why until they passed us too.

They wore scrolled and polished carapace armour and full helmets that covered their heads and shoulders. Beautiful bronze-coloured armour, the colour of aged sipping-liquor. Their faces bulged with darkvisors and machine-sights. There were grenades and limpet-meltas pouched at their hips and fat-barrelled fast-fire hellguns slung at their backs.

One of them was coming down the line nearest us now, near enough for me to see the Hive City Militia emblems etched into his armour and hear the soft buzz of the climb-harness that was lowering him. Buying kit like that would send an Underhiver broke for a year. The visor was turned toward me, watching me without expression. The hand dipped toward the belt.

That broke the spell. I yelled something half-coherent and ran. I left the other two standing in the winchnest and raced down the spar, running for the little burrow in the rockcrete wall where the winchboys slept and ate. My feet thumped on the catwalk's rubber grip-mats.

I remember looking over my shoulder. Backni right behind me, the same fear in his face, yelling my name: 'Kass! Kass!'. Sebyo, slower, still at the pintle-light railing, and the man in the bronze armour, his hand coming around in a languid, easy throw. I remember the soft sound of the grenade landing on the matting as I threw myself forward and a wordless cry from Sebyo, running just fast enough that he couldn't stop running towards it.

I remember lying on my face in the burrow with my ears full of static from the blast. I remember hearing Sebyo's scream – he wasn't so badly hurt that he couldn't cry out as it threw him over the railing and down the Well. I remember Backni taking four more rattling breaths and falling silent.

And I remember my hearing coming back as I lay there willing my limbs to move, in time to hear the sounds coming up the Well. They were faint and echoing but unmistakable – the snap of lasfire, the rattle of stubber-fire, the boom of grenades.

That's the starter, the kick-off; the memory of Hive City coming down to Junktion to take us apart.

WATER FOR ALL, NOT JUST THE RICH.

THE WORDS WERE written in letters of glow-green paint, three feet high against the wall of the Upper Six roadpipe out from Junktion towards Twodog and Dying Gorge. The light was bright enough to catch the paint and make it almost leap off the rough metal behind it and the writing was rough and angry. You could imagine the knuckles of whoever had held the jet-brush, white and shaking as they had painted the slogan on. It grabbed the eye just the way the painter must have wanted it to.

It had grabbed someone else's eyes already. Filling most of the roadpipe, shuffling on the packed dust and slag-gravel that made up the walkable floor, a knot of sombre grey shapes regarded the words. I stopped about a dozen paces away, letting them realise I was there and get used to me. Junktion is safer than most parts, but there isn't anywhere in the Underhive where it pays to startle a crowd of strangers, and lately people round here had more reason than usual to think with their trigger fingers.

There's a body language and a way of walking that most Underhivers know and I used it now. Small steps so I wasn't rushing at them, face neutral, one hand on the holster at my hip so they knew it was there. I think I looked more confident than I felt. All of the shapes were pretty much the same, silent lumps about human height. No faces, just thick vulcanised dust-hoods that dropped down into knee-length ponchos, belled out like a sting-jelly's skirts where packs and satchels were slung underneath them.

For a minute they just stood in the dimness and I had one quick moment of alarm, then the shape furthest front yanked back his hood and turned into a tired-looking man, maybe ten years older than my thirty-two, with sweat on his forehead and grey stubble on his chin. He pointed the chin at the far wall and then looked back at me.

'We hadn't heard about this.'

Hadn't heard things were drying up? I didn't say it outright but the question must have shown on my face.

'The attack we heard about. Not this. Things this bad up here already?'

He was watching me carefully. You can pick up a lot from how someone reacts to strangers asking about their town. This guy had the trick of it, but not of hiding his interest. I didn't give anything away. I'm good at that. Ask anyone I've played Ko'Iron Six-Card with.

'Few people are unhappy about the rationing, I guess,' I said after a moment. 'Lot of these slogans around now.'

We looked at the letters together.

'Bizer Enning', he said eventually. He had the accent of someone from the Twodog gantry-tunnels, overemphasising his words from having to talk through the heavy cloth mask that kept the lichen-mites out of the mouth and nostrils. Enning wasn't the name of any of the bigger Twodog families I knew of, but that didn't necessarily mean anything.

'Sinden Kass,' I told him back, and we nodded to each other.

'How would a newcomer get a water ration, then?' he asked. His voice had made the question casual but his eyes said otherwise. I spread my hands.

'Can't tell you. Lot of people have come in from the badlands since the raid, wanting rations. You can't buy an allowance any more.' Not without some strategic choices in friends, anyway, but I didn't say it. 'The rules change on the hour, it seems like. You'd find out the latest at the gates.'

He nodded and glanced back at the other shapes behind him. They didn't seem so threatening now.

'How far down the way, then?'

'About an hour of walking. Maybe another quarter more, depending. It's downhill, but if you've come a way...' He nodded, looking a little more tired, and started to fumble with the edges of his hood.

'Safe, do you think, or should we...' He made a downward-patting gesture by his hip, the gesture for 'be fight-ready'. I grinned at him.

'Relax, sir. You're on your way to Junktion. Haven't you heard the stories?' He managed a smile back at that, and pulled the hood all the way on to turn into a shape again. I watched them as they set off down the roadpipe, with

soft steps that soon blended with the little creaks and echoes that you hear in the Underhive all the time.

I went over the conversation as I went about my work by the scrawled-on wall. For a while I felt a little bad about acting so cool about Junktion's safety, but I soon put it out of mind. Things weren't that bad around Junktion, after all. At least they weren't back then.

THE LIGHT TILE I was there to work on was the furthest point of the rounds for that lightson, and the one I wanted most to get out of the way. I hadn't admitted it to Enning, but the letters on the wall here were new, and so were the last two I'd seen on the way there, and there were more around all the time in the weeks since the raiders had hit Junktion. I had had to get back into the habit of keeping my coat tucked back behind my holster and the fast-draw flap down.

The tile itself was still glowing, which was just as well. There are fixtures around Junktion that we lamplighters know how to repair, but those upper-circuit roadpipe tiles with their bright white glow are definitely not an example. But the framing was hanging loose and the reflector slats were badly gunked and that I could do something about. I got the housing back into position with only a little cursing, and the grime and crap came off the slats easily enough. By the time I was done the tile was bright enough to read my map by, which I hadn't been able to do before, and that's my test for a job properly done. The brighter light made the graffiti even more brash than before. WATER FOR ALL, NOT JUST THE RICH. Flashes of the colour kept jumping into the corner of my vision as I walked away.

THE NEXT STOP was the only really nasty one, seeing to one of the arclights on the elevated bridgeway that climbs up to the Shining Falls trail and crosses the cavity between old hive domes. The cavity floor is carpeted by fungi with these big, glistening, dish-like pads that people say like to drink the light. I've heard if you shine a lamp down onto them you can actually see all these cups of white fungus-flesh shivering and trying to turn to the lantern-beam. Balancing out on the

stanchions in all that open space is bad enough, but the thought of those nodding white saucers all stirring underneath, waiting for the light to come back on, made it worse. Even with my clip-line a job out on the girderwork out there can never be over soon enough.

Luckily it was a quick job. The rubber coating had been stripped off the juice feeds by decay or some gnaw-happy local wildlife specimen, and I had enough replacement stuff in my pack. Some peddler Thamm knows brings it up from deeper downhive. I have no idea where they harvest it from, but if you melt the salvaged stuff a little you can knead it into place easily enough.

I finished up in good time and was walking back down the bridgeway within half an hour, swearing to myself as I always do that before we had to fix those damn feeds again I'd call in a favour with one of Junktion's jackleg foundrymen, and get little cages made to keep the vermin off the arclight arrays. With my own cash if I had to, I had enough to spare and I hated the bridge jobs enough for it to be worth the expense.

There had been more stories from further down that way, too. Attacks by feral ratpacks and swoopspiders, even scavvies if you believed the rumours, things that had been drawn out of the badlands since the attack, looking for water and finding prey. I didn't think anything would come this close to Junktion, but you never knew. I was thinking about bringing back the old arrangement from when Nardo and I first lit the bridgeway, one working on the lights and the other one standing guard with a piece at the ready.

I could see Nardo ahead of me now as I came slogging down off the bridgeway and through the wreckage and giant branching fungi that ring the Fog Flats. The chem-fog was only just starting to really thicken as the air chilled on its twenty-hour cycle, and the lights from Junktion's walls beyond us were still individual points of light instead of the orange glow that they would become when the vapour was at its thickest. We'd be gone by then: at their thickest the fogs had some kind of stinging taint to them that drove the toughest winch-crews indoors.

Nardo was leaning against the biggest of the line of corroded girders that ringed the winchport, holding up an ungainly curtain of razorwire and trap-chains. He was easy to pick out: like me he had his pack and tool belt, his little collapsible ladder sticking up over his shoulder and the pool of light from his lantern-pole bobbing around him. There's no official markings for Junktion's lamplighters, no Guilder-style medallions or colours like the gangs wear, but you can tell us by our kit. Good gear and good clothes. We get looked after.

'More slogans around,' I told him as we walked. The Junktion lights were growing brighter, and to our left the fungus forest was thinning out into the spore-orchards and metal humpies of the Peelgut plantations.

'Yeh. Saw 'em myself. Same as the others.' Nardo had never said where he was from, but he had the thickest muttering downhive accent I'd ever come across.

'Same?' I asked him. 'More of the "water for all" ones?'

'Yeh, some o' those. Few others. "Junktion water's our water". Like that.'

'Haven't seen any of those,' I said as Nardo darted a look around and slid a water-flask out of his coat. 'Only different one I saw was near the old feral pits at the bottom of the roadpipe, up on one of those big hanging vent covers. Same green paint. Said "We shall fight and we shall drink."'

I was grinning. Nardo had taken a mouthful of water before he thought about it, started laughing and had to gulp and double over before he could get it swallowed. I saw some figures around drum-fires inside the liftport looking around curiously, but lamplighters tend to get left to their business.

'Think that's quite what they're after?' I asked Nardo. "'We shall fight and we shall drink.'" Might even get a few more recruits that way. Let 'em think they're on their way to a piss-up.' Nardo thought about it again and laughed again, and this time he did choke. Water spurted out of his mouth and soaked the stubble on his chin and the front of his heavy grey tunic. I clapped him on the shoulder.

'Look at you, then, stuck-up spoilt lamplighter on your water stipend. Get ten Guilder chips for that in the Square.'

‘Screw you, rich man. How much y’got stashed in that hole of yours? Hoarding y’water, y’bastard.’

We traded elbow jabs and kept walking. Nardo and I were the two oldest lamplighters, with five years or more on Venz, Mudeye or Thamm, but we were good enough friends that we caught ourselves acting like juves when we were on rounds together. Thamm even made jokes about us being twins although we looked nothing alike – me long and lean and pale under my broad hat, Nardo with his stocky shoulders and squashy, jowly face and rolling way of walking. But we worked well together. We got on.

Nardo gave me a swig from his flask. The water tasted brackish and metallic, the way it always seemed to now the town was using the emergency cisterns. Then he realised he was walking along with his flask on show and stowed it again in a hurry, and after that we went on in uneasy silence. This was not the sort of conversation people were supposed to have in Junktion.

JUNKTION. FORTRESS-TOWN, meeting of roads, trading post. Boom-town, sitting at the bottom of the Junktion Well, sprawled on top of the Piles. Come and visit us sometime.

It happens anywhere in the Underhive where any two trails or through-halls or roadpipes meet. Any joining of roads has its drinking hole, or flophouse, or at the least a half-arsed communal dust-tent and a scruffy knot of pedlars hawking food and lucky charms. At places like Junktion, where one of the big uphive collapses has torn a hole down through the guts of the hive, you get something bigger. Not the biggest of the Underhive’s collapse pits, definitely nowhere near that great chasm at Dust Falls where you can’t see one side from the other even with a stablight and anything you toss in will fall all the way to the Sump. But it’s big enough to be valuable.

Nardo and I were close enough now to see where the Junktion lights sloped up the sides of the Piles. That was where the rubble had settled, all the smashed rockcrete and ripped metal that had cascaded down to make the Well. Some time long after the collapse a band of now-nameless

wanderers found that it had settled enough to be stable and set up a camp that turned into a permanent enclave, that turned into Junktion. The giant Black Pile with the brightly-lit cisterns and sentry tower at its top, across the sludge canal the Red Pile where most of the collapsed metal seemed to have landed and rusted. The little nub of Guilders' Hill was too small for us to make it out over the wall and through the thickening fog. We both walked a little faster.

If I took my eyes off the sides of the Black Pile and looked quarter-turn to my right, I could see a point of light moving unsteadily upwards. A second to listen and I could hear the faint grind of the winch. Someone's cargo, off up to number-one nest in among the rooms chopped into the rockcrete at the bottom of the Well, where the smashed shaft from the collapse bellied out into the burrow that Junktion town lived in. From there it would go into another pannier to be hauled up to number-two nest in its half-collapsed dome; from there the cable from number-three nest would hoist it up through the broken roof and up to the bluff of packed rubble where the cable from—

(‘Hey you two, what’s coming down? You see that?’ The sound of the grenade.)

But I didn't feel like dwelling on number-four nest now.

Anyway, that's Junktion's real jackpot, right there. You've come up from the deep Underhive, up from Glory Hole or Blackenred, up from where most people have never seen light that came from a power lantern rather than a burning wick, or a gun that fired las-shots instead of slugs or scatter-shot. You've lugged your load of spider shells or eyes, or mutant pelts, pearl-spores, even archeotech, stuff that'll have the whiteneck uphive traders fighting to push creds into your hand. You reach Junktion, rest your feet, buy some refined booze and a night (or at least an hour) with someone you fancy who might even have all her fingers and toes, both eyes and no visible scars.

There would be enough of that even with just the roads. Junktion is where a lot of trails meet. Head twelveward and you can get on the roadpipes for Mirror-Bitten, Ghoul Bend, Scrubtangle, even Baiters' Dock down on the sludge

lakes. In the other direction there's Shining Falls, and the big arterial pipe that opens up Dying Gorge, Tarvo, Wilhelm's Crossing, Coma Gulch and Twodog. But then there's the Well on top of everything else.

Because when you're ready to move again, what's going to look better? Plod on up the trail through another hundred, hundred and twenty, hundred and fifty levels? (No, I don't know how many, I've never cared to stare up into all that empty air long enough to count them.) Spend weeks more in the roadpipes, risking wildlife, scavvies, bandits, quakes, gunk-floods? Or are you going to stay in Junktion, eat a nice late breakfast, and then roll yourself out to the liftport? Buy your winch chit from the town fathers and hand it off to the hauler crews, then you watch as your goods get hoisted up to be at the stockade up there by the next lightson?

Don't listen to the grumbling you hear about Junktion prices, about how the only difference between the Junktion town fathers and a bandit gang is how the bandits don't bill you for wear and tear on the gun they hold to your head. For every pannier that gets hauled up the Well you can bet there are five caravan bosses cursing the lucky bastard whose cargo it is and jockeying for the next chit, and ten more setting off through the roadpipes and wishing like hell they could afford a winch passage at all.

So, Junktion the trade-town, the boom-town. Once there's money flowing through a town in the Underhive, well, people with money need guns and ammo and people to use them on their behalf, and they want booze and smokes, and the people who provide them with those need food and juice and parts and entertainment of their own. And there are plenty of things that nobody would ever think they needed at all except that places like Junktion fill up with folks who'll provide them anyway. Soothsayers, kootchie-girls, or amiable gentlemen who get mysteriously luckier with the cards once their opponent has a few shots of Second Best inside them (and turn out to have some burly, bad-tempered friends in the event someone gets pushy about it).

So the place has a reputation in this corner of the Underhive. It's in Junktion, people have said around here for

more than seventy years, and in the Underhive that can be nearly three lifetimes. Whatever you need, it's in Junktion. Whatever you need, go to Junktion.

Which was why Nardo and I were suddenly walking in silence. Why the slogans about fighting made me uneasy, why watching Nardo hide his water flask was worse. Junktion was a town that made money. It was the town where people came to live large. It wasn't the town where you were supposed to have to look over your shoulder before you took a drink. It wasn't the town where you found your conversations circling around and around the idea of *revolt*.

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