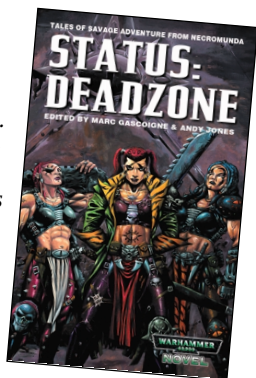


# STATUS: DEADZONE

## TALES OF SAVAGE ADVENTURE FROM NECROMUNDA

*KNIFE-EDGE LIZ closed on Terrak Ran'Lo. The old man was moving for cover, crouching behind a side-table. She fell upon him, dragging him to the ground. His breath was wine-rancid, his eyes glazed with age. He looked at the woman, her face sprayed with the blood of the inquisitor, and his eyes span.*

*'A message from the Underhive,' Liz spat and pulled the trigger.*



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THE CLOCKWORK bird spiralled down through the shaft of sunlight, its jewelled wings alive with multicoloured fire. Spinning down from the high vaulted ceiling, it chimed a harmonious yet melancholy series of notes. A dying fall.

Ty Helios Kayne watched the bird's descent and wished that he could be somewhere, anywhere else but here.

The bird's downward path looked to be taking it towards one of the series of ornamental fountains that ran the length of the gallery, whose waters caught the light that streamed in through the high arched windows, transforming it into a thousand small rainbows. A metre or so from the fountain, the bird suddenly changed direction. Its inner mechanism, rewound by the motion of its fall, drove it once again upwards, towards the vaulted ceiling and the flock of similar toys that inhabited the gallery's upper reaches. As it rose, on a gentler trajectory than it had taken during its descent, it chimed again: a rising, more cheerful cadence.

Kayne left the bird to its flight and looked out from his position on the dais that had been erected in front of the altar. The hunters stood in a line before him, helmets held in the crook of one arm, trying not to shuffle and twitch with suppressed excitement. He knew that their minds would not be on the ceremony taking place in their honour. They would be trying to imagine the hunt to come, trying to conjure up the sights and smells of the Underhive, the world below the Wall, below the Spire in which they had lived their whole lives. No more practice bouts with each other and members of the House Ty militia, learning the rudiments of combat in their offworld-crafted battlesuits. The next fight they found themselves in would be for real and upon their success or otherwise would depend

much of their future fortune. A successful hunter would not be short of supporters in the kaleidoscopic landscape of shifting alliances and petty politicking between the noble families of House Ty and, by extension, between the Ruling Houses of Hive Primus.

Kayne caught himself on the verge of a yawn – easily disguised when one was just one of the hundreds of attendees that filled the body of the gallery, unforgivable when one stood before the altar, representing one's family. He clamped his jaws shut and fought to suppress the impulse. How did his father manage to endure these things? If the old man wasn't confined to his bed amid the usual rumours of poison and attempted assassination, Kayne wouldn't be standing here alongside the other Nobles of House Ty, feeling more keenly than ever the unwelcome attention that had been directed at him since his return alone from the last hunt that was sanctified in this place.

*Old Man Cal might very well be poorly, Kayne could almost hear the whispers that were passing among the assembled congregation, their bellies full from the banquet that preceded the blessing, tongues loosened by wine, but Bael should be standing there in his place, not Kayne. Bael was pureblood, not the fruit of some concubine's loins.*

It didn't matter that fully four-fifths of those present were also the products of semi-official liaisons in their families' seraglios. All the surreptitious talk of bloodlines, 'fitness' and 'honour' was coded language, disguising the one word whose utterance could lead only to a formal challenge and to blood: cowardice.

'May the Emperor who watches over us all grant you courage, luck and cunning,' intoned the priest, standing at the altar, overlooking the dais and the gallery beyond. The massive carved monolith bore a representation of the Emperor in Glory, triumphant after his defeat of the Heretic, Horus. Looking out from the dais, Kayne spotted the black-robed retinue of the Emperor's living representatives, standing out like a patch of unnatural shadow among the brightly-dressed throng.

Inquisitor Cinar had come to the end of his tour of the Spire and was awaiting passage on an Imperial transport due to arrive in this Segmentum in a few days. He and his acolytes had moved from House to House, accepting the ritual entertainments that were his due and, apparently, doing little else. The rumour mill had, of course, ground out stories of clandestine

meetings, even journeys beyond the Wall, but there had been no arrests, no show trials; none of the noble families had been exposed as a nest of heretics.

Kayne wondered whether his own story had reached Cinar's ears. *Seven of them descended into the Underhive, as is the custom among young House Ty noblemen, yet only he returned. His older brother – their father's true heir – was among them. He claims he saw his comrades slain, that he barely escaped with his life. The Underhive is a dangerous place, to be sure, but...*

Kayne could imagine Cinar, moving among the crowd at yet another interminable banquet, nodding absently as a fawning noble, anxious to be seen as a confidant to the Inquisition, poured out the tale in a conspiratorial whisper. A footnote to be added to the inquisitor's report on his visit, perhaps, or just one more piece of gossip to be discarded, forgotten moments after Cinar moved on through the crowd. Kayne knew which of the alternatives he would prefer.

'Good hunting,' intoned the priest.

'Good hunting,' repeated the congregation. Kayne realised with relief that the ceremony was nearing its end. Soon the hunters would leave the gallery, conduct the final checks on their suits and begin their descent.

'Go forth and return in—'

The priest's last word, 'glory', was destroyed by the sudden bark of gunfire from the far end of the gallery, followed by a strangled scream and a crash as one of the ornate, tempered-glass doors was torn from its hinges.

The noise caused an immediate reaction in the packed gallery: panic. Those nearest the source of the commotion surged towards the far end of the gallery. Those already standing closer to the altar did likewise in an attempt to avoid being trampled. From his vantage point on the dais, Kayne watched as a tidal wave of richly dressed bodies rolled towards him. There were more gunshots, more screams as people fell beneath others' feet. A uniformed figure flew through the air, over the heads for the fleeing crowd, legs and arms pinwheeling brokenly. Kayne, straining to make out what was going on at the far end of the gallery, caught sight of a hulking figure with broad, armoured shoulders, lashing out with an oversized fist in a blur of piston-driven motion and slamming another militiaman into the backs of the terrified mob. A rain of autogun shells broke

against the intruder's breastplate, fired by a militiaman who was back-peddalling frantically. The armoured hulk closed in on him, its other arm outstretched, and was lost to sight behind the furthest of the fountains.

Time froze, then ran backward, taking Kayne with it. The gallery's glass-and-gilt dissolved, to be replaced by the shattered landscape of the Underhive. For an impossible, endless moment, Kayne found himself in the time and place that he had last seen such a figure, moving with the same deadly purpose...

The impact drove Kayne to the very edge of the dais, almost tipping him into the clear floor space at the feet of the hunters who, after a second spent exchanging confused glances, were locking their helmets in place and powering up their suits. Kayne turned and saw that his erstwhile companions on the dais were engaged in an undignified scramble for the higher ground of the altar. The priest had already retreated behind the monolith; Kayne caught sight of his pale, wide-eyed face, staring out from one side of its bulk.

At the foot of the dais, the line of militiamen, seconded to form the hunters' honour guard, struggled to turn and face the attack, only to be confronted by the onrushing tide of terrified nobility. In an ill-advised attempt to bring the wave to a halt, one of the honour guard fired his autogun over the heads of the crowd. The wave broke, people scrambling in all directions, pushing, kicking and clawing at those around them. There was an almighty crack as one of the ornamental fountains was dislodged by the sudden force of bodies slamming against it. Water plumed from the broken pipe, knocking people from their feet, washing them back under the well-shod heels of the mob.

Homing in on the tell-tale hiss of las-fire hitting flesh, Kayne spotted the inquisitor and his retinue, backed up against one wall in the space between two plinths, each topped with the bust of a past ruler of House Ty. Each of the black-robed retinue had produced a laspistol from within the folds of their robes and was cutting down any member of the mob unwise enough to seek sanctuary in their direction. At occasions such as this, all but ceremonial weaponry was forbidden – Kayne himself was wearing his father's jewel-encrusted, blunt-edged and utterly useless sabre. Presumably no one had dared attempt to apply this restriction to the Emperor's representatives. The cowl had

fallen from the head of one of the retinue; Kayne glimpsed the ruby glow of a tech-adept's ocular prosthetic before the deep-throated cough of a bolter launcher, followed by a chorus of renewed shouts, screams and curses wrenched his attention back to the area immediately in front of the dais.

The monster stood in the middle of a suddenly clear space, as if it had emerged from a trap door in the marble floor slabs at the behest of a stage conjurer. In one oversized metal paw it held the limp body of a member of the family militia. Once again, Kayne was assailed by memory: the intruder wore an Orrus-class battlesuit, as he had done when he travelled below the Wall, as did three of those hunters this ceremony was intended to honour. But this suit bore the scars of innumerable battles. The once-smooth surfaces of its plating were heavily pitted and gouged; the plates covering one shoulder appeared to have been peeled back by far heavier ordnance than was available to the militiamen in the gallery, exposing some of the suit's wiring and the actuator mechanisms. Having emerged from the throng to one side of the dais, it seemed to pause. Its head swung from side to side, as if searching for something. Tilting its head upwards, its gaze fastened on Kayne, by now the only person standing on the dais. He half-expected it to emit the growl of some feral animal about to pounce.

Two of the Orrus-clad hunters fired their glove-mounted bolters, hitting the intruder mid-chest. The interloper was punched backwards, but managed to retain its footing. Several unarmoured bystanders and a militiaman fell, caught by shrapnel from the twin impact. It was a good strike. By rights, the threat should have been eliminated – its chest had been reduced to little more than a smoking ruin. But, impossibly, it stood there, stubbornly refusing to die.

Worse yet, it struck back. Firing bolts from both fists, it blasted both its attackers back into their fellow hunters and the chaotically milling crowd beyond. Under other circumstances, it might have been comical – some of the brightest lights of House Ty, clad in combat rigs assembled at vast expanse by off-world expertise, thrown into an ungainly heap of servo-driven arms and legs. However, as the monstrosity, the fresh wounds in its carapace still smoking and leaking drive-fluid onto the floor, turned its gaze back to the lone figure on the dais, Kayne could find little to laugh about.

There was no point in trying to run. To turn his back on this thing was to invite a bolt between the shoulder blades. Feeling like a prize fool, he drew his sword. Even the intruder seemed to appreciate the absurdity of Kayne standing above him, brandishing the antique weapon in the face of an opponent who, wounded or not, bore enough firepower to smear him across the altar stone and all those who were currently sheltering behind it.

Kayne hurled the sword at the intruder and leapt from the dais, landing beside the prone body of one of the hunters' honour guard. As Kayne bent to pluck the autogun from his nerveless grasp, the fallen man twitched and moaned. Kayne ignored him and levelled the autogun on the intruder. A headshot might work, but down a foot or so, at the point where the flexible mail protecting the neck and the more solid plates that covered the chest...

The interloper rocked back on its heels as the bullet slammed home, then righted itself. For a moment, it seemed as if this shot would also be shrugged off. Then both knees buckled. Twisting as it fell, it slammed onto the floor face-up.

Kayne was first to the body, autogun still held ready. His target might have been a statue, fallen from its plinth. Kayne bent, reached out with one hand and unfastened the clasps on either side of the helmet, then wrenched it away.

The pale grey eyes were still open.

'Brother.'

A fine mist of blood accompanied Bael's words, bubbling up from his throat, ruptured by Kayne's single shot. 'We're still there... where you left us.' He coughed, struggled to continue, the light fading from his eyes.

'Waiting for you.'

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