

CARDINAL CRIMSON

A Necromunda novel

By Will McDermott

In the nightmare industrial hive world of Necromunda, gangs clash in desperate battles to increase their standing with the decadent families who occupy the uppermost spire of their teeming hive city. In the midst of this, suave bounty hunter Kal Jerico is dragged before crime boss Nemo to collect a bounty in return for cancellation of his substantial debts. But when Kal realises that his nemesis Cardinal Crimson is mixed up in this, he knows it won't be an easy day at the office.



Will McDermott follows up his first Necromunda novel, Blood Royal, with another cybergoth tale of survival!

About the Author

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.

Cardinal Crimson can be purchased in all better bookstores, Games Workshop and other hobby stores, or direct from this website and GW mail order.

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It felt to Jobe Francks like he'd been walking through the ash wastes for days. In truth it had probably been a lot longer. The ten mile high cone of Hive Primus had loomed ahead of him all that time, seemingly just at the edge of the horizon, never appearing to get any closer. Like a magnet that had changed its poles, it drew him in just as it had pushed him away so many years ago. Now, the home of his youth towered above him.

The tattered remains of his leather trousers and jacket barely covered the old man's stooped body. Scabs from decades-old blisters dotted his ruddy feet, chest and arms. But his face, perhaps protected from the harsh environment of the wastes by the massed tangle of white hair that enveloped his head, was both clear of blemishes and milky-white in complexion.

Francks looked up at the imposing structure of Hive Primus, now mostly shrouded by the layer of poisonous clouds that surrounded it

some five miles up. These clouds were testament to the hardworking men and women of Hive City, who toiled in factories so that the nobles could live luxurious lives high up in the spire, well above the poison and filth beneath them. These foul gases also made the ash wastes what it was – an inhospitable hell where even the dregs of society dare not live.

The magnetic attraction drew Francks on toward the Hive. But he knew, deep inside, that it wasn't the Hive that drew him back now. No, it was the body.

'It is time, old friend. It is time.'

He mumbled the phrase over and over as he trudged across the final stretch of wastes. He slipped through the same crack he'd used all those years earlier and trudged on. Now shrouded in darkness as he unconsciously followed the circuitous route from the ersatz entrance toward more habitable areas, he continued mumbling. 'It is happening again. Just as you said it would. It is time. Time for the Universe to pay its debt. It is time, old friend. I am coming.'

'Are you talking to me, old man?' asked a guard.

Francks looked up at the question. Somehow he had found his way to the Hive City docks. A ship flew past him, headed for the mooring berths where its cargo would be unloaded, inspected, catalogued and then stored in one of the many warehouses lining the wall of the dome.

A distant memory pulled at his mind. Smugglers. Sometimes cargo needed to bypass inspection. Ships landed in the Wastes and the special cargo got smuggled into the Hive through tunnels beneath one of the warehouses. The Saviours had done some work for the smugglers back in the day. Francks had used that connection to escape the Hive. Now he was back.

Why was he back? The Body. The Bowdie. He shuffled on again, mumbling. 'It is time, old friend. It is time.'

The clanking of boots running across metal was followed quickly by a hand on his chest. Francks looked up, trying to focus his cloudy eyes on the shape in front of him.

'Okay, gramps,' said the guard, his other hand on the butt of a gun still in his holster. 'I think it's time you stopped walking and tell me what in the Spire you're doing here.'

'I have returned from the wastes to reclaim that which was lost,' said Francks. 'The body of Bowdie will return. You will see.'

‘Um, yeah,’ said the guard. ‘Well, I think you’ll have to wait for your buddy in a cell until someone who makes more creds than me figures out what to do with you.’ The guard grabbed Franks by the arm and twisted it, trying to turn him around.

Franks whirled around, easily slipping his thin arm out of the guard’s grasp. From the look of surprise on the man’s face, Franks moved much faster than the guard thought was possible. He pulled the guard forward and gently kissed his forehead.

When Franks released his hold, the guard slumped to the floor at his feet. ‘Be at peace,’ he said as he stepped over the unconscious guard. ‘The Universe has a plan and the time draws near.’

Kal Jerico longed for the day in the not so distant past when he had been hanging from a catwalk with his faithful, yet disgusting sidekick Scabbs holding on for dear life to Kal’s trousers, which had slipped down to his ankles after they both tumbled over the edge. Ah yes, that day was infinitely better than this one. Or the time that Scabbs had almost blown them all up when he kicked a grenade off the street. That was a fun time... compared to today.

‘Have we lost them yet?’ asked Kal, not wanting to look back and confirm his worst fears.

He heard a slosh, which might have been Yolanda turning in the waist-high muck to get a look at their pursuers, or his cyber-mastiff Wotan breaking the surface to make sure everyone was still with him. Or it might have just been Scabbs going face first into the dross. Again.

No report was forthcoming from either of his bounty hunter companions, so Kal cocked his head and took a look back. One of the blond braids that framed his wide face fell across his eyes, but he could still see clearly enough.

Yolanda, his brash, amazon-like, sometime partner jogged through the muck beside him. Impossibly long legs kept her loincloth-covered waist just above the brackish, oozing liquid. The scowl on her face and the creases running through the tribal tattoos above her eyes told Kal that she was no happier about this situation than he.

A wake in the muck to the other side showed Wotan’s progress. Just then, Wotan’s metal nose broke the surface and the mastiff let out a sharp, tinny bark. He was none too happy either, it seemed.

‘Good thing Wotan doesn’t need to breathe,’ said Kal. Scabbs, on the other hand, did need to breathe, but was probably so used to his own stench that he wasn’t bothered by the smell of this place. In fact, his constant dips into this muck could only improve the little half-ratskin’s odour.

Scabbs was just pushing himself up out of what Kal now suspected was raw sewage, gauging from the brown clumps sticking to his scabby, pudgy face. If it weren’t for the ashen colour of his skin, it would be hard to tell where Scabbs left off and the sewage began. Unfortunately, he had fallen behind the other two and was now dangerously close to their pursuers.

Which brought Kal to the crux of the problem. The Goliaths – six angry members of the Grak gang to be exact – were not slowed down by the muck as much as Kal had hoped. These huge, barrel-chested behemoths with their hulking frames strode through the deep muck as if it were no more than a puddle. The sewage barely reached the Goliaths’ knees. Luckily, they only had frag grenades and shotguns, and were still out of useful range for both. But that wouldn’t last for long.

‘Great plan, Jerico!’ yelled Yolanda beside him. She grabbed the edges of her tight-fitting vest and puffed her already well-endowed chest out a little further in what Kal soon realised was an attempt at imitating him. ‘Let’s cut through these pools. The Goliaths will never follow us through this muck.’

Kal glanced down at his leather coat, the bottom half of which he realised with a groan was beneath the sewage. He was certain he had never stood clutching his lapels like some soft, Spire-raised politician puffing up before a speech. His poses were much more awe-inspiring.

He grabbed theommel of his sabre, nearly dipping his hands in the muck, and cocked his head just so before replying. ‘They wouldn’t have chased us in the first place if you hadn’t shot half of them in the chest,’ he said. ‘You know that just makes Goliaths mad.’

Yolanda whipped around toward Kal, sending her cascade of dreadlocks flying in a vicious circle around her head. ‘And I wouldn’t have had to shoot any of them if you hadn’t spent so much time cutting the head off Grak.’

‘Do you know how thick their hides are?’ asked Kal. ‘Not to mention their steel-like bones. And that head is worth thousands of creds–’

Scabbs cut in. 'Uh, Kal?'

Yolanda and Kal turned on the little man, who had caught up with them as they argued. 'What?' they yelled together.

'Grenade!' cried Scabbs, pointing to a round object dropping toward the muck behind them. He dived forward into the ooze.

Kal and Yolanda looked at each other for a split second before following Scabbs under the dross. A muted explosion made Kal's ears pop and the resulting wave forced his body down to the slimy ground beneath the sewage.

He broke the surface of the muck a moment later, sputtering and fuming. Chunks of what Kal desperately hoped was mud clung to his coat and stringy bits of something greenish-yellow dripped off his braids, nose and beard.

'Alright, now I'm mad,' he said. 'Time to finish this. Come on.' He ran on ahead, trying to get back out of grenade range.

Scabbs swiped a scabby hand over his slimy face as he ran, which did little more than smear the brown chunks, like a paste, across his flaky skin. 'So, you have a plan, Kal?' he said more as a statement than a question.

'Yeah,' replied Kal. 'I'm going to kill them and then go get drunk and forget about this day.'

'Another great Kal Jerico plan,' retorted Yolanda, easily keeping pace. 'We needed a grenade launcher to take down Grak, and that got scavved. How exactly will you kill six Goliaths before they rip your arms out and beat you to death with them?'

Kal glared at Yolanda, but somehow the slime and organic matter had completely slipped off her body when she came out of the muck, leaving just a liquid sheen covering her bare arms, midriff and heaving cleavage. He quickly lowered his eyes toward her weapon belt, which held about a half-dozen grenades. He then smiled as a plan formed in his head.

'With that,' he said, pointing at her waist.

'No way, Jerico,' said Yolanda. 'I'd rather die standing, if you don't mind.'

'Not that,' said Kal. 'Get your mind out of the sewage.' He smiled at his joke, but neither of his companions were laughing. 'Hand me your grenade belt, he continued. 'You, too, Scabbs.'

His companions looked like they wanted to protest, but both knew better than to fly in the face of a Kal Jerico, live-by-the-seat-of-your-pants plan. Kal took the two bandoliers and reached under the muck for his mastiff. Finding Wotan, he knocked on his steel head. The cyber-mastiff surfaced and looked up at Kal, metal jaw open showing a row of sharp, spike-like teeth. Kal was certain that if Wotan had a tongue, it would be lolling off to the side right about now.

Kal draped the bandoliers over Wotan's head, pointed at the oncoming Goliaths, and commanded, 'Wotan! Deliver!' He then pointed toward the muck. 'Stay down!' he added.

The mastiff's head slipped back under the muck. Kal watched as the wake moved off to the side and began heading back toward their pursuers, who were getting dangerously close to grenade range again. Kal glanced at Yolanda and Scabbs, and smiled as he pulled out his twin laspistols and twirled them both at once. He stood facing the Goliaths. 'This should be fun,' he said.

Yolanda obviously didn't trust in Kal's plan because she kept slogging through the muck. 'Enjoy your death by dismemberment,' she said. 'I'll come back for Grak's head after they're done with you.'

Scabbs, who had stopped when Kal stopped, looked back and forth between his two protectors. He shrugged, which dislodged several large muck-covered flakes of skin from his neck. 'To the end, Kal. To the end,' he said.

'Thanks, Scabbs,' said Kal. 'You don't know how much that means to me.' But Kal could tell by the way Scabbs kept glancing behind them at the retreating Yolanda that his heart wasn't really into it. But he knew the plan would work. It had to.

A moment later, the muck in front of the Goliaths erupted as Wotan soared into the air, spraying the giant gangers with slime and refuse. The mastiff's impressive leap carried it over their heads. The stunned Goliaths could do nothing but watch as the metal beast soared above them. Wotan whipped his head back and forth at the apex of his jump, shedding the bandoliers, which fell on the heads of the two leaders.

As soon as Wotan hit the muck behind the Goliaths, Kal opened fire with both weapons, sending blasts of superheated particles racing toward their pursuers at the speed of light. His shots slammed into the chests of the two leading gangers, which would have had little effect if they hadn't both just acquired new bandoliers full of explosives.

The resulting cascade of explosions ripped through the entire gang as the initial blasts set off the rest of the ordnance carried by the giants. Once the smoke cleared, Kal was quite pleased to see not a single Goliath standing in the muck.

Then he noticed the wave of sewage headed toward him from the blast site.

‘Oh crap!’ muttered Kal.

‘Why are those men standing there?’ asked the foreman, a large, beefy man by the name of Grondle. Foreman Grondle had a thick shock of black hair that covered his entire head except for his eyes, nose and bright red cheeks. His stomach extended just slightly out past his huge chest. You might call him rotund, if you were absolutely certain he couldn’t hear you.

When the small man beside him didn’t answer, Grondle pointed a pudgy finger at a group of workers milling around near a three-storey pile of rocks, concrete blocks and other debris that spilled out of the side of the dome. He’d just recently come on the job and had specific instructions from his boss to get the work back on schedule. This twenty year-old rockslide, most likely caused by a hive quake, was his first priority. ‘Those men, there, Dinks.’

‘They say the rockslide is unstable,’ replied Dinks, the crew leader. He was a short and officious looking fellow, with toothpick arms, no chest to speak of and a ring of short-cropped hair running around his otherwise bald head. ‘We’re waiting for the engineer to show up and inspect it.’

‘We have to get that cleared by week’s end,’ he grumbled. The masons were scheduled to come in and begin to shore up the dome after that, and if he slipped even a day on the schedule, it would take months to reschedule them – months that he would be out of a job. ‘The engineer was here yesterday and declared it safe. Get them back to work.’

‘But...’

The foreman glared the crew leader into silence. Staring down at the little man, who seemed better suited for library work up in the Spire than construction, the foreman realised Dinks must have got the job of crew leader because he wasn’t physically able to actually do any work.

‘No “buts” except yours and theirs up on that pile of rubble, clearing rocks!’ demanded the foreman.

Dinks looked like he wanted to argue, but decided it would be easier to clear rocks than to sway Grondle’s decision. He turned and skittered away toward the rockslide. A moment later, the crew began climbing up the rubble. They formed a chain with Dinks at the bottom, a decision he probably regretted when the first, huge chunk of masonry was handed to him and he had to lug it over to the bin.

Tavis would just love that. Waiting for an engineer inspection. The nerve of that Dinks. Guilder Tavis was not the easiest man to work for. He knew what he wanted and had enough money and power to make everyone’s life miserable until he got it. Right now, he wanted this old dome cleaned up for a huge new manse. As if the palace where he lived now was too small for him. Hmmph, thought Grondle. Probably too small for his ego.

A series of low rumbles snapped Grondle out of his reverie, but they ended as abruptly as they had started. Grondle looked around at the various work areas. It hadn’t sounded like a hive quake, it had been too regular and too short. Then he heard screams and turned to look at the rockslide. Men, rocks, and chunks of concrete tumbled down the hill toward poor Dinks, who stood rooted to the spot in fear, screaming, his face ash-white.

Grondle ran toward Dinks, screaming, ‘Get out of there, you fool! Move!’

But it was too late. The chunks of rubble rolling down the hill from the top unleashed even more rocks and even a few boulders as the avalanche swept over the line of men, building momentum and growing ever larger as it careened down the hill.

Halfway to the foot of the hill, Grondle screeched to a halt and began backing away. Debris piled up where Dinks had once stood as more rubble spilled down the hill. A head-sized chunk of rock bounded past Grondle as he turned and ran from the continuing avalanche.

And then it was over. The ringing in Grondle’s ears from the continuous rumble of rocks cracking against one another came to an end. He looked back at where Dinks and his crew had been just moments before, and saw nothing but what seemed to be an even larger pile of debris than before. Grondle pulled a cloth from his back pocket

and began to wipe the sweat from his forehead. 'I'm going to need more men again,' he grumbled. 'Tavis won't be happy about that.'

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