

# SURVIVAL INSTINCT

*A Necromunda novel by ANDY CHAMBERS*

D'ONNE ULANTI is an outlaw and a maniac, known amongst the scum of Necromunda as 'Mad Donna', as her uncontrollable and violent nature makes her a dangerous and unpredictable ally.

However, it looks like time has finally caught up with D'onne when a figure from her mysterious past approaches her, but all he reveals is that she's been sold out. Barely escaping with her life, D'onne is mad as hell and hungry for vengeance. The Underhive will shake to its foundations as D'onne seeks to even the score.



**Andy Chambers** is best known as a games designer, having contributed heavily to the development of Warhammer 40,000, Battlefleet Gothic, Necromunda, Epic 40,000 and many other Games Workshop games and supplements over fourteen years. Andy now works freelance. *Survival Instinct* is his first novel.

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## *from SURVIVAL INSTINCT*

TALK. SOME SAY Underhivers do nothing but talk, that they chatter like reprieved convicts coming out of solitary. Fact is, to them, talking is all about survival: where the lashworms have taken root, where the waste spills are toxic, who's top dog, where to find trade or scav, who's new in town. It's an unwritten law that nothing is taboo down here. A refusal to answer just about any question is a tacit invitation for a fight, not that it's uncommon to see it used as such.

So it is that the drinking holes and slop shops are always filled with a hubbub of gossip that hangs in heavy clouds like the twisting obscura smoke and the greasy fumes of tallow candles.

So when *she* walked into Hagen's place, everyone, and I mean everyone, already knew that Mad Donna was in the settlement of Glory Hole.

It wasn't like in the pict-shows; the music didn't stop, everyone didn't shut up and stop what they were doing to stare. But there was a discernable dip in the noise and a dozen subtle shifts in body postures betrayed curiosity or fear or bravado or guardedness in the crowd. She gazed brazenly at the inhabitants of the shadowy bar with her brilliant blue eye, zapping them with a billion volts of bad attitude. You get a tough crowd in Hagen's place, but few were brave enough to meet her gaze and no one was about to challenge her right to be there.

Outlaw. Psycho bitch. Renegade noble. With a multiple choice of reasons like that to choose from, it was easy to hate or fear Mad Donna. Her gory reputation had spread through Badzones like a twenty-kay rad-cloud in the five cycles she had been below. She was easy on the eye with a dancer's long

legs and a set of bewitching curves more flaunted than obscured by her body-casque. Her face would have been beautiful if it wasn't etched by hard lines of cruelty and despair. Legend had it that she'd torn her own eye out years before when a barkeep had told her she was pretty, and now one socket was covered by a glittering, unblinking bionic. Truly there was more softness and compassion in that metal eye than the remaining real one. She carried well-worn weapons on her curving hips, two pistols and a slender chainsword she called 'Seventy-one' for the number of fingers and toes it had chopped off in its time. A dozen pairs of eyes in Hagen's place quickly found other places to be.

She ordered Wildsnake and was greeted by two Escher gangers – Tola and Avignon – emerging from a side booth looking like they didn't really want to be there. The three had obvious deal-talk to conduct: Tola was speaking fast and waving her hands, Avignon chiming in, Donna nodding occasionally. No doubt they wanted to hire Donna's renowned fighting skills as insurance for some scav-run, gang fight or turf war.

Meanwhile tongues were wagging amongst the assembled Underhivers and fighters, telling and re-telling the old stories about Mad Donna. There was the one of how she had murdered her noble husband in the Spire.

'With a silver fish fork no less,' Akas Fishbelly had added knowingly. 'Gouged out 'is eyes.'

Then how she had fled to down-hive to escape her father's wrath, somehow staying one step ahead of the enforcers and bounty hunters all the way. How she had even ghosted through the impenetrable mass of security at The Wall to get from the Spire into Hive City. How she had killed her own sister, how she had skinned a Goliath who crossed her once, how she had carved out a killer reputation in half a decade of gang fights and craziness.

Gradually thoughts turned to other things and cups rose, dice rattled and chips fell once again. That was when it happened. A new voice was heard above the murmur of talk in the bar, and what it said produced that immediate black hole of silence so beloved of storytellers.

'D'onne Ulanti?'

The speaker found himself with Mad Donna's laspistol pressed between his eyes in an uncoiling blur that was almost too fast to see. She spoke in a husky, murderous burr.

'No one has dared use that name around me for five years, so you'd better have a damn good reason for using it now.'

The man at the edge of death was a scrawny young pit slave. A Merchants Guild ownership stud in his forehead winked nervously a millimetre above the laspistol's hungry muzzle.

'I-I have a message from Guilder Theodus Relli for D'onne Ulanti,' he bleated. 'Please don't kill me.'

Donna scanned around the bar without moving the gun and wondered which sack of pus had named her to this hapless rube. Many faces flinched away at her icy glare, but none revealed themselves as the potential sump-stirrer. She holstered the pistol and pointedly turned her back, opening her gloved hand palm-up in front of the slave's nose. After a moment's hesitation a grimy scroll was pressed into her hand and the slave fled.

'What the frik?' said Tola, gazing at the authentic-looking guilder seal embossed in metallic inks on the pale roll of hide.

'Someone wants your attention,' observed Avignon wisely, an effect she ruined only marginally by dripping Wildsnake over her chin as she swigged back another shot.

'Someone is asking for a kicking,' said Mad Donna and dropped the message on the slop-pooled bar top.

'Aren't you going to read it?' asked Tola.

Mad Donna shook her head. 'No, I'm going to finish this bottle and then find Guilder Theodus frikkin' Relli and break it over his no doubt fat and balding head.' Her gaze was distant. 'No one has messages for D'onne Ulanti to hear. She's long dead.'

'Can I read it?' Tola was nothing if not impetuous, little more than a juve really, an effect enhanced by her close-cropped, dirty-blond hair.

Donna gazed at her evenly for a moment. 'Sure.'

Avignon gave Tola a long-suffering 'I-can't-believe-you-just-did-that' look but Tola was too busy breaking the seal and unrolling the scroll to notice. Her lips moved unconsciously as she read the words. Avignon impatiently snatched the scroll out of Tola's hands and laid it out on the bar for them all to see.

It was handwritten. The practiced pen strokes of a scribe were now growing soft-edged like patches of mould as the pale hide drank up puddles of cheap alcohol, but it had been nicely written. It read:

*To the esteemed nobledam D'onne Astride Ge'Sylvanus of the House of Ulanti,*

*Please forgive this unwarranted intrusion but a matter has come to my attention regarding your past that I felt you should be apprised of with immediacy. I feel it would be unwise to communicate the matter in a simple letter, but I feel sure that such knowledge could be conveyed in person for a suitable consideration. I can be contacted via Strakan's warehouse on the third tier should you wish to pursue this matter further.*

*Yours in faith,*

*Theodus Relli  
Of the Merchants Guild*

'Trap,' belched Avignon.

'No, blackmail. He wants to get a payoff,' said Tola. 'What he's saying is "pay me off or I'll tell someone else about it and they'll pay me off instead".'

'Could be either, or both,' said Donna. 'Most likely the worm has already sold me out and wants to double his money.' Her blue eye was hard and bright with interest. 'It's been tried by bounty hunters before, but never by a guild.'

The Merchant Guild formed the tenuous threads that stitched the scattered settlements of the Underhive together, moving from place to place trading their wares. They were powerful enough to enjoy as much of a protected status as

anyone could claim in the Hive Bottom, the sole supplier of essentials and comforts that were unobtainable otherwise: flak cloth, lumebulbs, protein supplements, data slates, pict slugs, power packs, air filters, fuel rods. They had their fingers in lots of pies and it didn't bode well to make an enemy of one. Guilders had a habit of sticking together and could swing enough credits to put out a bounty so big it would mean a death sentence for just about anybody. Common wisdom was that when guilders took an interest it meant bad things were right around the corner.

'You gonna go?' Tola asked.

Donna shook her head. 'I'd have to be crazy to fall for it.' She wadded up the letter and threw it at Hagen. 'More snake! And make it good or there'll be hell to pay.'

And that was that.

THE SETTLEMENT OF Glory Hole was called that because it was a hole: a fungus-like outcropping of trade posts, hovels, workshops, rickety gantries, palisades and trailing cables clustered around a sixty-storey drop between two half-collapsed domes. Centuries ago neglect and unimaginable loads from Hive City above had caused this part of the Underhive to splinter and crack like old bones. A hab-dome that was once half a mile high and six across had been crushed down to a quarter of that size, and the falling debris opened a hole to a larger, older dome beneath that had been previously sealed off by an unbreakable floor of thick ferrocrete.

Underhivers are great survivors by nature; those that aren't get killed off too quickly to find out why. After pulling themselves out of the wreckage they soon investigated the giant hole. The freshly opened dome turned out to be a cornucopia of scav and scrap buried in a vast sea of dust and detritus that was dubbed the White Wastes. People came from all over to try their hand at plumbing the depths, so the settlement of Glory Hole sprang into existence to supply their needs and relieve them of their newly found wealth. Some of the boldest fortune hunters came back with archeotech hoards big enough to buy a place in the Spire, or so the stories went, and some didn't come back at all.

The White Wastes below had long since been tapped out by Donna's day, but the settlement of Glory Hole hung on just because it was there. Most of the gambling holes and flesh joints had closed down, but enough people stayed around to make it a community. Fungus farmers and rat herders brought their produce there, guilders took their cut, gangs and hired guns generally passed right on through and the authorities generally stayed away. That's just the way the Underhivers liked things.

Mad Donna made her way unsteadily across the second tier, its rusty patchwork of metal plates and mesh grilles creaking every step of the way. She was contemplating the fact that a little less Wildsnake and bravado earlier on would have made things a lot easier for her now, but she was definitely intrigued. It had taken a while for it to settle in but it was there now and nagging like a loose tooth.

What she hadn't told Tola and Avignon were the two things that stood out in Relli's letter. Firstly, it had followed the correct uphive forms of address for herself as a spyrer: nobledam was an old term that just emphasised that nagging fact. Then there was the big one. Relli had used her full name – D'onne Astride Ge'Sylvanus Ulant, that is, D'onne the divinely beautiful daughter of Patriarch Sylvanus of the House Ulant. The very name brought back bad memories and a surprisingly hot flush of anger. That name was not commonly known in the Underhive. D'onne Ulant, for sure, but her full name hadn't even been used on the bounty flyers. That, more than anything else, pointed to the genuine involvement of another noble, quite possibly even a family member.

Donna approached the edge of the tier, where it was unfenced and ragged before the yawning drop. It was quiet in this section, far from the nearest toll-lift. She picked out a sturdy looking cable and carefully wrapped her legs around it before sliding herself over the edge. A cool, foetid breeze blew up from the depths and ruffled her long hair with ghostly fingers as she swarmed down the cable. The floodlit warehouses of the next tier looked doll-sized and distant below, further down than she had thought. The indirect

approach of sneaking down onto the third tier without being seen had seemed the smart thing to do. Dangling above a dizzying drop on a rusted old cable made it seem a lot less smart.

'Nobledam,' she hissed to herself. 'Ge'Sylvanus,' she spat. Gripping the cable suddenly seemed a lot easier when she could envisage it as her father's throat.

Strakan's warehouse had the trappings of a typical guild place: three-metre fence rigged with booby traps, a main gate that could stop a tank, guard towers, wall guns. Donna squatted on a nearby roof and contemplated her options. She counted two armed pit slaves making the rounds inside the compound and three more in the towers. Jumping the fence was just about possible if she got it right. She had thought about just going up to the gate and demanding to see Relli but even Mad Donna wasn't that crazy.

It started to rain, a fine drizzle of condensation falling from the upper layers and bringing a smell of wet ash sharpened by a tang of ammonia. The two slaves in the compound hurried for cover, obviously frightened of acid rain. Stupid green hivers, Donna thought to herself as she dropped from the roof. The kind of effluvia from above which could strip flesh from bones smelled of rotten fruit. This rain produced only a mild prickling burn and was actually good for getting rid of lice and other parasites.

She ran, fast and limber, towards the fence with its ominous hanging fruit of booby trap frag grenades and scatter shells. At the last instant she leapt forward and up, kicking her legs high and arching her body to clear the top of the fence. Wildsnake and the wet surface conspired to screw up her landing, so she turned it into a shoulder roll and came up next to a pile of crates.

No alarms sounded from the slaves in their little towers. All good. A sort of covered veranda ran around the outside of the warehouse, cloaked with invitingly deep shadows. She moved cautiously towards it, resisting the urge to run and staying in cover. The two pit slaves on patrol rounded the corner and she froze as they went by. They were tough-looking characters for all their obvious inexperience. Like most



pit slaves, their owner had modified them with crude bionics to suit their function better. One's arm ended in a circular buzz-saw blade and his legs in metal claw feet that rang on the veranda as he approached. The other sported a piston-powered set of shears on one forearm and a half-skull of metal. Both were carrying big bore stub pistols and a bandolier of cartridges.

The modified pair was making more noise than a Goliath gang at a line dance and passed Donna obliviously. As they rounded the corner out of sight she got up and started across the few metres of open space to the veranda. Then it happened.

A door opened and Donna made out a figure emerging. She was then blinded by a row of floodlights kicking on along the edge of the building, bathed in a harsh sea of light totally unfamiliar to someone used to the natural gloom of the Underhive. As she tensed to spring back, a hotshot las-blast scored the plates at her feet in a glowing, spitting question mark. Avignon had been right. It was a trap and Donna was well and truly friked.

'D'onne Ulanti aka Mad Donna, by the authority of Lord Helmawr I arrest you on warrants outstanding in the Spire.' She recognised the harsh, whispering voice. It was Shallej Bak, an ex-Delaque gang fighter turned bounty hunter. If he was here, the puke with the hotshot was probably his cousin, Kell Bak. Like so much else in the Underhive, bounty hunting was a family business.

'Drop your weapons.'

'Come and get them, Shallej, if you've got enough fingers left to try.'

Another hotshot sizzled into the plating close enough to make her involuntarily skip sidewise.

This was hopeless. She could hear the two pit slaves coming back but she could barely make out either them or Shallej in the glare. She raised her hands and closed her bright blue eye.

One thing most people forgot when it came to bionics was that good ones could have distinct advantages over the fleshy original. Donna's artificial eye was a top-range Van Saar

model. Among several useful quirks it featured an automatic photosensitive glare filter.

Shallej, a bald, bulky figure in a long flak coat, was standing a little to the left of the door, covering Donna with the red dot of a bolt pistol targeter. Buzz-saw and Shears were approaching from the right. Shears had his pistol holstered and was carrying a jangling set of manacles. Donna reckoned Kell was in a tower also off to the right.

Shears grinned confidently and stepped forward to toss the manacles to her. As he did so, he momentarily blocked Shallej's line of fire. That moment was all Donna needed. She bounded forward and grabbed Shears in an arm lock. Buzz-saw's stub pistol boomed off a round but fired wide and Kell's shot was a fraction of a second slow as the hot-shot's power pack struggled to build up a fresh charge. Shears howled when Donna bit off his remaining ear and spat it in his face. Shallej cursed.

Blinded by the hot, sticky blood covering his bionic thermal sensor and reeling off balance, Shears was in trouble and he knew it. He panicked and tried to use his piston-enhanced strength to throw the snarling, laughing woman off, but Donna spun him by the elbow and rammed his cumbersome bionic blades into Buzz-saw's guts. It was unfortunate for the bloody pit slave that Shallej's bolt round caught Shears just above the eye at that same moment. The .75 mass reactive gyro-jet pulped his head like a ripe melon being hit by a truck. His death-reflex jerked his shears shut and messily eviscerated Buzz-saw into the bargain.

Donna was still moving while the pit slaves swayed in their gore-slicked embrace of death. Shallej expected her to run for cover, diving left or right, but she came straight at him instead, ripping out Seventy-one and thumbing the chainblade to life. Her shoulder blades itched with the expectation of a hotshot at any moment but Kell was obviously off-form and no shot came.

Shallej didn't raise his pistol to shoot at Donna since that had cost him three fingers last time they met and he'd learned from the experience. Instead he ducked out into the yard where he could count on support from his

cousin. Donna's screeching chainblade tore at Shallej's coat as she made a backhanded slash but she kept going, diving through the open door and into the warehouse.

Donna rolled to her feet and kicked the door shut, pumping a couple of las-shots through it at chest and groin height to dissuade pursuers. She turned and sprinted off between the rows of crates and bales, sword and pistol ready.

Nothing rose to bar her path. She could hear shouting outside, and then a volley of shots before the door banged open behind her. By that time she had already found what she was looking for: two heavy trapdoors in the floor with a girder-work, a frame and winch assembly over them. No guilder would pay the lift-tolls to have their goods brought up Glory Hole, so each warehouse had their own hoist to the tier below. It was the ideal escape route out of the bounty hunter's trap, or it would have been if the trapdoors weren't secured by heavyweight tungsten mag-locks.

The bounty hunters became stalking shapes behind the rows of chipped plastic crates and overstuffed bales. The distinctive rising whine of Donna's plasma pistol about to discharge sent them ducking back like jackals before a lion. The warehouse was sharply lit by an actinic blaze as the pistol fired, a thunderclap report and wash of ozone sending hard black shadows leaping to the corners.

Bounty hunters knew their guns and a plasma weapon took precious seconds to recharge. They moved quickly to encircle their cornered prize, emerging at the skeletal A-frame hoist in a coordinated rush.

They found the trapdoors melted through, their edges still glowing cherry red from the fearsome heat of a plasma blast. Of Mad Donna there was no sign.

DONNA SWORE LONG and loud as she applied a stinger mould poultice to her burned shoulder. A drip of molten steel had caught her as she clung to the bracing beneath Strakan's warehouse, listening to the Bak brothers bitching and planning their next move. They hadn't mentioned Relli so it didn't sound like he was in Glory Hole.

She'd almost bitten through her lip but hadn't uttered a sound.

She was 'holed up', as Underhivers say, in a broken pipe halfway up the wall of the dome below Glory Hole. She had a dew-sheet stretched out and a small fire going with a couple of cat-sized rats roasting on spits, the dribbling grease hissing and popping in the flames. She kept an eye out in case any other scavengers were drawn to the smell, but most Underhive creatures instinctively steered clear of fire and smoke, except those on two legs of course. Looking out into the gloom Donna could see white ash dunes and mesas of fallen rockrete topped with twisted forests of girders. The only thing moving was a distant string of lights, probably the lanterns of some guilder caravan. It wasn't safe here but it was quiet and it gave her some time to think.

No matter how far she ran or how deep she buried herself she could never outdistance her past. The Underhive was a haven for criminals and renegades of all sorts, and for hivers desperate enough to gamble everything on starting a new life at the very fringes of civilisation. Most were running from something, but most were safely forgotten and ignored once they were in the Underhive – it received both outcasts and hopefuls to its dark bosom with equanimity. Not so for D'onne Ulanti.

Being a feared and hunted outlaw sounded exciting and romantic but the reality was a grim, sometimes desperate, existence dogged by the ghosts of the past. Donna's previous life in the Spire was a half-remembered dream which at moments like this her mind would treacherously patch together as a mosaic of her best memories, pushing her further down the spiral road of regret and despair. Donna occasionally convinced herself it had all happened to someone else. In truth she had become someone else now – Mad Donna had replaced D'onne Ulanti even though she wore her stolen flesh. She had fallen so far and lost so much of the comfort and security guaranteed by life in the Spire. Sometimes she wondered why she kept going at all; it would be so much easier just to put a pistol to her head and end it for good.

To end up in the Underhive was the worst thing that could happen to someone from the Spire. Suspicion was the best you could hope for, since half of those you meet would be happy to kill you just for having an uphiver accent. If the Underhivers didn't kill you, then there were a hundred other hideous deathmongers close at hand: spiders, scorpions, snakes, rats, millasaurs, carrion bats, ripper jacks, face-eaters, sludge jellies, lash whips, wire weed, brain leaves, gas spores, zombies, cannibals, mutants. The list went on and on, and there were plenty of other things even the Underhivers didn't have names for. There were also the toxic spills, the sludge pits, the acid rain, the gas pockets, the carcinogens in the dust, the food, the water, the air, the hive quakes, flash floods, electrical discharges or the simple expedient of a long drop onto something unforgiving. It was not a gentle land.

And now Donna must walk that land and find some answers, find out *how* Relli had found her and, more importantly, *why*. In the Underhive, notoriety was like body odour – everyone had it. Actually finding someone specific instead of a bunch of rumours took persistence and no little skill. If she was going to avoid being caught, Mad Donna needed to know a lot more about her hunters. She knew that the best places to find news on guilders were the settlements of Dust Falls and Two Tunnels, both of which see more guilder caravans than anywhere else because of their locations. The only alternative would be to keep running in the Badzones between settlements until the hunters caught up with her again, and next time she might not be so lucky. And why not simply end it all, simply stop running and lie down to die? Because then it would all have been for nothing, and she would have given in to her innermost demons, the ones with her father's voice that said it would have been better if she had never been born at all.

Trekking to Dust Falls from Glory Hole usually meant a roundabout journey across the White Wastes up to the rusting gantries over Cliff Wall. From there the commonest paths went through the Looming Halls and down the interweaving tunnels of The Lesser Trunk. There were other ways, quicker ones even, but that was the easiest and safest one. Because of

that there was always a good chance that gangers, outlaws or both (and it's often hard to tell the difference) would be roving in parts of the Looming Halls, taxing or murdering travellers as took their fancy. Enterprising gangs often put up toll-blocks on Cliff Wall too, or fought vicious battles for possession of them.

The alternative was to strike out straight across the wastes to the foot of Cliff Wall, go across the rotting pipes at its base and into a confusing tangle of ancient turbine chambers. If you then could find a way through the sludge pits and collapsed areas you would emerge, perhaps, into the generatoria dome at the bottom of The Lesser Trunk, and would only be a march away from Dust Falls and the edge of The Abyss.

Going the roundabout route was simply not an option. There was too much of a chance of being recognised on the way and word getting back to the bounty hunters. They would have thrown out a web of informers around Glory Hole within an hour of losing her, hundreds of ears sharp for any news. Time was also an issue. If she kept ahead of any reports reaching Relli she would have an edge. She desperately needed one.

Flexing her shoulder experimentally, Donna found it surprisingly free of pain. The poultice was doing its work. She realised that her injury would not hinder her and she was pleased since the lower route was sure to be physically demanding. She checked her weapons too, as the sludge pits were supposed to be rife with vermin.

Seventy-one was as close to full charge as it could be, its ceramite teeth sharp and moving freely. She found some torn scraps of Shallej's coat caught between the teeth and braided them amid the other trinkets in her unkempt hair as a memento. Her laspistol was an exquisitely made spyrer pattern that she had carried for as long as she had been in the Underhive. In all that time she had never had to replace the power cell or even recharge it, nor once clean the muzzle lens, yet it remained ever ready to inflict harm. She loved and hated the elegant pistol, and had almost thrown it away or sold it dozens of times over the years. The gun didn't care and continued to serve her as faithfully as a hunting hound.

Her plasma pistol was a different story; a heavy, crudely made and pug-ugly looking Underhive piece. She had cut it out of the dead, nerveless hand of an outlaw called Kapo Barra after a fight outside Two Tunnels. Kapo and his gang had ceased to exist when Mad Donna and Tessera's Escher had caught them in an ambush. The bounty fee from the grateful hivers of Two Tunnels had not been as great as promised, but the loot was excellent.

Donna had kept the cumbersome plasma pistol because it was such a great equaliser. No matter how tough an opponent was, a blast of incandescent plasma would seriously wound or kill them and they knew it. Even the sound of it about to discharge would make most foes duck for cover, and as the escape from the warehouse had proven, its ability to annihilate obstacles was more useful still. It was on a three-quarter charge, the power-hungry pig that it was, and firing it would have to remain a last resort until she was near a viable power source. Finding a replacement plasma flask for it would be harder still where she was going.

Smoked rat meat plus water from the dew-sheet and filter can would be her food and drink for the journey. What she needed to do now was rest and save her strength for a few hours before setting out. She settled herself into the pipe and flipped her bionic eye to its alarm mode. If anything bigger than a fly approached her hiding place, a motion-sensor would instantly wake her. She slept fitfully.

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