

NECROMUNDA

LASGUN WEDDING

It's SURVIVAL OF the fittest on the towering industrial hive world of Necromunda, where brutal gangs fight for supremacy in the nightmare Underhive and decadent nobles play power games in the higher echelons of the Spire. Kal Jerico, suave bounty hunter, is drawn into a deadly game of his own when the ruler of Necromunda falls dead and he is coerced into taking his place! Assassins vying for Kal's blood and power mad nobles are the least of Kal's worries as, still adjusting to life as Lord of the Spire, he has to get married! Will McDermott follows up on *Blood Royal* and *Cardinal Crimson* with this, the third in the intriguing and explosive Kal Jerico series!



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Will McDermott is a fantasy and science fiction writer specializing in game-related fiction. In addition to his *Necromunda* novels, He's written novels and short stories in the worlds of *Magic: The Gathering*, *Dungeons&Dragons*, and Monte Cook's *Lands of the Diamond Throne*.

More storming action from Necromunda

SALVATION

C S Goto

SURVIVAL INSTINCT

Andy Chambers

JUNKTION

Matthew Farrer

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HE WATCHED THE battle through a spyscope from a safe distance. The hood of his massive, black cloak kept drifting down over his other eye. He wished to be rid of the scavving thing as it impeded his movement and kept getting caught in his hands and legs as he had trudged across the Ash Wastes, but the discomfort of kicking the fabric away from his heavy, iron boots and constantly pushing the hood up onto his wide forehead were far outweighed by the need to keep the ash from building up on his joints and weapons. Without an ash cloak and the respirator that covered his wide face, he wouldn't last an hour in this desolate wasteland. Luckily, it wouldn't be much longer.

Muties had surrounded the transport almost as soon as it slammed into the wastes. The impact had created a trough fifty metres long. The transport lay half buried in ash at the end of the trough. A hundred muties, the barbaric, scavenging natives of the wastes, pounded on the sides with clubs made from iron beams or copper pipes or any piece of scrap metal they could salvage from the deteriorating exterior of the hive.

A dozen muties had climbed on top of the transport and begun banging on it, scratching at it, and even, it seemed, getting on their hands and knees and biting the metallic exterior. Amazingly, they had managed to pull up and tear off several metal panels, which they then dropped on top of their comrades below.

He marvelled at both their strength and the durability of their fingernails and teeth. It was said they could claw the bones out of a man's body and bite through his skull. He no longer doubted these claims.

But it was their small victory that precipitated the muties' ultimate defeat. As soon as the second panel hit the ground, the rear of the transport opened up. Las blasts sprayed out of the opening, dropping two dozen muties in the opening

salvo. A squad of royal guards took up defensive positions around the door, dropping any who charged them. More las blasts ripped into the mutie ranks from inside as well, followed by rocket propelled grenades that blasted holes in the ash dunes and sent mutant bodies flying into the air.

But he gave the muties credit. They regrouped quickly, moving out of range of both the interior and exterior royal forces. Then, after a deathly calm, the muties brought out their own artillery – rocks and chunks of rockcrete – that they launched through the air with just the force of their own arms. The projectiles hit the ash all around the rear guard. A single rock couldn't do any real damage, but the constant barrage had a cumulative effect, and the cloaked man saw at least two guards fall, wounded or possibly even killed, and dragged inside.

As the bombardment continued, the royals had no choice but to give up on their defensive position. Two squads charged out of the transport and fanned out around the sides. Their first target: the remaining muties on top of the transport. Once they took those out, a third squad climbed up to claim the high ground.

Several more royals dropped, screaming, with chunks of metal sticking out of their body armour or blood spewing from broken noses and slashed foreheads from lucky shots. But they were slowly gaining the upper hand.

A shuffling noise behind him made the hooded man turn. The leader of a ragged group of scummers, hired mercenaries the cloaked man had brought out into the wastes with him, stood impatiently behind him. He thought his name was Kyrian.

He could see little more than Kyrian's eyes beneath the slightly built man's cloak and respirator, but those eyes kept darting back and forth between him and the battle raging below them. 'Just give the order, sir,' he said with a half-hearted salute, 'and we'll move in on the transport.'

The 'sir' was more sneer than respect, and by the snickering of the other scummers behind Kyrian, the cloaked man was certain the salute was some private insult. The scummers had been told to obey the cloaked man; he was in charge of the expedition. They were little more than hired guns, and it

seemed to irk Kyrian and the rest somewhat. The damn scummer had been calling him 'sir' ever since they left the hive.

He glared at the snickering scummers, almost daring one of them to make a move. Of course, the respirator and cloak minimized the power of the glare, and he couldn't tell if it had any impact since they were all covered as well.

He did notice several scummers drop their hands down to the butts of their weapons, and that satisfied him. If he couldn't get fear out of these killers then anger would suffice, so long as they took that anger out against the enemies they were being paid to fight.

They were only twenty strong, including Kyrian, but he'd been told they were the best. They certainly looked the part. The cloaked man hadn't seen such a large arsenal in many years. Each member of Kyrian's group had a lasgun as well as a smaller sidearm, and a full third of them carried heavy weapons, while the rest had a shotgun as a back-up. Before they'd donned their ash cloaks, he'd seen some impressive armour as well, plus a wide array of grenades and even a few chainswords. Still, the cloaked man would reserve judgement until he saw them in action. All of the advanced weaponry in the hive mattered little in inexperienced hands.

Kyrian gave him that odd half salute, again. It was starting to get quite aggravating. He growled a little before answering and was gratified when the scummer took half a step backwards. 'Give the muties more time,' he said. 'They can't defeat those royal scum, but perhaps they can thin out their ranks a little more before we move in.'

'We're not afraid of royal troops,' said the scummer leader. He cupped his hands over his eyes and scanned the distant battle. 'We can handle them.'

He pocketed his spyscope and stared at Kyrian for a moment before continuing. Was this scummer really that green? Where had they hired this idiot? 'You should be afraid,' he said, 'because you can't handle them; not an entire platoon anyway, and that's what they've got in there. We wait.'

'Yes, sir.'

'And stop calling me "sir",' he growled. 'And if I see one more salute, I'll rip that arm out of its socket and slap you on the forehead with it myself.'

KAL JERICO, UNDERHIVE bounty hunter, awoke in an unfamiliar bed. Of course, he rarely rose from the same bed twice and more often than not hadn't even made it to a bed before passing out from the night's festivities. Then there were the countless times out on the hunt when he'd been forced to bed down in the wilds of the Underhive, amidst vermin both human and animal, covered in muck and blood and other bodily fluids too horrible to think about.

But this was different, and yet familiar at the same time. For one thing, the bed moulded around his body, gently pulling him into the comfort of its folds. The cool, crisp sheets slid against his bare legs and chest like a soft caress. It was a far cry from the lumpy, sawdust-filled mattresses and burlap covers of the various Underhive dives where he normally woke up in the morning.

And then there was the light. A bright, white light permeated everything, reaching into every crevice of his brain. Even with his eyelids shut tight, it seemed to assault him from all sides. Kal squinted as he opened his eyes, trying to keep the light out a little longer. He couldn't make out anything past his toes pushing up the covers into two little towers, but he already knew where he was. The soft sheets, the enveloping bed and the bright glare of natural light could only be found in one place in the hive.

He'd been kidnapped and transported to the Spire. Again.

He might even be in the same apartment that had served as his ersatz prison the last time his father had required his services. As his Underhive eyes adjusted to the direct sunlight, more and more of the room came into focus. A tapestry hung on the wall above him depicting Lord Helmawr directing a great space battle from the bridge of a huge ship – a scene Kal knew to be pure fantasy. To the side, a mahogany table held a bowl of real fruit and a pitcher of water so clear it sparkled in the sunlight. Beneath the bank of windows opposite the bed were several plush velvet couches. And, backlit by the bright sunlight streaming in behind them, three lovely ladies lounged on the couches.

Kal sat up, letting the sheet covering his naked body drop to his waist. 'Candi?' he asked. 'Brandi? Sandi?'

The girls rose to their feet almost as one. Blonde, brunette, and Sandi, the redhead. Their silk nightgowns shimmered, turning nearly transparent in the direct sunlight, offering tantalizing glimpses of the wonderful curves beneath as they slinked their way to the bed.

'We were wondering when you would wake up,' said Sandi.

Brandi and Candi just smiled and nodded as they crawled up the bed towards Kal and pushed him back down onto the sheets.

'So, WHATCHA WANNA do?' asked Scabbs.

Yolanda glared at him. 'Don't start that again,' she warned. Her brow furrowed, making the gang tattoos snaking across her forehead and around both ears seem to pulse with intensity. Scabbs decided he'd better heed her warning.

He considered the runny, brown eggs and the black brick he supposed was toast on the plate in front of him and shrugged. 'Looks like the Sump Hole got a new cook,' he said.

'Somebody shot the last one,' replied Yolanda. She wasn't even looking at Scabbs now. She seemed to be staring at a spot on the wall far behind him.

'Again?' he said, tossing the fork onto the plate. It sloshed through the eggs and landed on the table, leaving a brown smear in its wake. 'Don't you think they'd get the message and find a better cook?'

'This one *is* better,' she said.

A silence descended on them, broken only by occasional whimpers from beneath the table. Scabbs peered down at Wotan. The metal mastiff hadn't moved since Kal ran out of the bar the night before. The bartender had tried to make the dog leave at closing time, but it had growled and almost snapped the poor man's hand right off.

Scabbs had told him the bar would be safer with a watchdog and that he'd try to get Wotan to leave in the morning. Now, he looked at the mastiff and wondered how he would accomplish that feat. Wotan must not have seen Kal leave, and Kal'd been in such a hurry, he had forgotten to give the mastiff any new orders. It was now following the last command Kal had uttered, which was 'Stay.'

Scabbs looked back at Yolanda. She seemed almost as lost as

Wotan. No. Not lost. There was something else there on her face. Disgust? Disdain? Anger? They all looked pretty much the same on Yolanda. Scabbs had always found her hard to read.

‘What should...’ he began slowly, and then continued more quickly as Yolanda’s brow furrows returned, ‘...we do with Wotan?’

‘What do I care about Jerico’s scavving dog?’ she said. Yolanda picked up the toast and whipped it at Scabbs.

He ducked just in time to avoid a concussion. Behind him, Scabbs heard the sound of glass shattering. He turned to see the toast imbedded in the wall behind the bar. The contents of several bottles of wildsnake dripped onto the bald head of the bartender.

‘You’re paying for those, Yolanda,’ he said. ‘I covered you on the cook, but broken bottles is bought bottles.’

The bartender took his brown-stained rag and wiped the remnants of the bottles onto the metal grate floor where, Scabbs knew, it would all congeal together into a thick paste that gave the Sump Hole the wonderful odour it had been named for.

Wotan whimpered again, bringing Scabbs’s attention back to the table. ‘We’ve got to do something about Wotan,’ he started again, ready to duck if the eggs followed the toast. ‘Or else, those bottles will be the least of what we owe here.’

Yolanda growled something vulgar and kicked her leg out under the table. The resulting dull clang was quickly followed by a scream of pain. ‘Damn Jerico,’ said Yolanda. She pulled her foot up onto her other knee and massaged the toes. ‘This is all his fault. Again.’

Scabbs remained silent. He knew better than to get in the way of this particular tirade. ‘If it’s not Nemo and Crimson, it’s his scavving family. We go from crisis to crisis, always looking over our shoulders in case one of his enemies wants to take a pot-shot at him. And you know he’ll come out smelling like fresh, Spire air while we end up in the cesspool. Scavving Jerico.’

Scabbs hardly even listened. It was the same rant he’d heard a thousand times. He picked at a sore on his chin and considered his eggs. He was almost hungry enough now to eat them. Maybe he could get his toast back to sop up the brown yolk from the table. That might just soften up the black brick.

'We never just go out and hunt down bad guys anymore,' said Yolanda, continuing into the second verse. 'It's always family business and doing Nemo's dirty work. Just once, I'd like to go on a good, old-fashioned bounty chase. Or a treasure hunt. We could go looking for the Mother Lode or even just a cache of artefacts.'

She stomped her foot down on the floor, shaking the table and with it Scabbs's plate full of eggs. It clattered dangerously near the edge. Scabbs was torn between wanting to save his breakfast and wanting an excuse to not eat it. He decided to let the plate fall on the floor. The rest of the yolk sluiced through the grating followed by the grey outer parts. Wotan whined and chomped down on the plate, quickly reducing it to dust that mixed in with the eggs beneath the grating.

Scabbs was officially no longer hungry. But he was happy about one thing. Yolanda's perpetual gripe was finally winding down to its inevitable conclusion.

'We don't need that family-obligated, danger-attracting, ego-inflated rogue, do we Scabbs?' she said. Yolanda jumped to her feet, knocking the chair over, which hit the grating with a slosh and clatter.

'Are we bounty hunters or are we sidekicks?' She tried to strike an awe-inspiring, Kal Jerico pose, which would have succeeded if she hadn't slipped on the slick Sump Hole floor and landed on her loincloth.

Yolanda pulled herself back up and slammed her fist on the table, which made Wotan jump to his feet underneath. 'Come on, Scabbs,' she said. She walked to the back of the bar and yanked a bounty poster off the wall. 'We're bounty hunters. Let's go make some bounty.'

Yolanda stormed out of the Sump Hole, obviously unaware of the brown stain across the back of her loincloth. Scabbs wasn't going to tell her, that was for sure. In fact, anyone who knew Yolanda well enough to make such a personal comment knew her well enough to keep that comment to himself, assuming he wanted to continue breathing.

Scabbs took one last look at Wotan and realized if he didn't leave now with Yolanda, the bartender would soon ask him how he planned to get rid of the mastiff. It only took the scabby half-ratskin a second to decide which wild animal

he'd rather deal with. He slipped off the chair and slunk out of the sump hole. Yolanda had turned right and strode down the street. Scabbs pumped his little legs to catch up. Behind him, he could hear the bartender yelling at Wotan.

THE HOODED MAN had to admit it. The scummers were no slouches. Perhaps Kyrian, their leader, hadn't been all that naive when he'd said they could handle the royals. Still, their competence was no reason to enter a battle against two potential enemies.

Mutant bodies littered the ground around the downed transport as the mercenaries advanced on it. The wastes would claim the bodies by morning. Creatures far worse than muties roamed the ash after nightfall and what was not devoured or dragged off by carrion eaters would be consumed by the dunes themselves not long after.

The first barrage of weapon fire from the scummers had finished off or driven inside the remaining royals, but the battle was long from over. He counted fewer than ten royals amongst the dead. There would be that or more still inside.

The leader stood at his side again. The man could move quite silently. The hooded man reminded himself to watch this one closely during their remaining time together.

'They've closed the hatch,' he said. 'We'll set up the missile launcher to take it down. My men will move in to finish the job amidst the ensuing smoke and confusion.'

'No,' said the hooded man. He pulled at the cloak, the folds of which had once again caught on the metal beneath.

'But we should breach the ship quickly,' said the scummer leader. 'They are most likely waiting for reinforcements.'

'Exactly.' He stared at Kyrian, driving holes into the young warrior's forehead with his eyes. The scummer tried to maintain eye contact, and lasted longer than most men under his scrutiny, but eventually looked away.

'If military ships do arrive,' he continued, 'we'll need the launcher to defend ourselves from the greater threat. Besides, we can't take any chances of destroying the package. Find another way.'

He gave the scummer leader credit. The man only hesitated a second before replying. 'Fine,' he said. 'Any suggestions?'

He sighed. 'Draw them out,' he said, pointing a cloaked hand at the top of the transport. 'It worked for the mutants.'

'HELMAWR'S RUMP!' CRIED the bartender as the door closed behind Scabbs. 'Where in the hive is that ratskin off to? He promised to take that scavving metal mutt with him. Damnation!'

The bartender, an oddly thin man named Roddy, with a shock of thick, black hair fluttering around his head, came out from behind the bar and ran to the door. Throwing it open, he stepped outside and looked up and down the street. Other than a fresh pile of cracked masonry that had fallen from the abandoned building across the alley, the shadowy morning streets were empty.

Grumbling, Roddy kicked open the swinging door and slipped back inside the bar. He smoothed down his apron and ran his fingers through the curly bangs that always threatened to fall down over his eyes. It was all mental preparation for the dangerous job he knew lay before him.

Wotan had nearly taken his hand last night, but this was business, and when it came to business Roddy had a determination rarely matched in the Underhive. Most bartenders were fat and jolly from constantly partaking of their own wares. Not Roddy. Every bottle in the place was bought and paid for. Even his waitresses and cooks had to pay for their own drinks. This was business and Roddy never mixed business with pleasure. Well once, but he'd regretted it ever since.

'Never did get paid for that bottle,' he muttered as he walked towards the table.

The metal mastiff had to go. It would drive off paying customers. Roddy knew that because it routinely snapped at patrons even while Kal Jerico was here to control it. Roddy had always left well enough alone because the bounty hunter brought in more business than the mutt drove away, but now it was him or Wotan.

As Roddy neared the table, Wotan began to growl. It was an unbelievably scary sound, reminiscent of a revving chainsword. It made you think that your arm was about to be cut off, which was pretty apt really.

'Good dog,' said Roddy in a sing-song voice. He saw the rem-

nants of the busted plate and leaned back towards the bar to get another. He lowered the plate towards the table. 'Here you go, Wotan,' he said. 'Want the plate?'

Unfortunately, he misjudged the mastiff's reach. Wotan's head snapped forward in a blur, and his metallic jaws clamped down on the dish, snatching it from Roddy's grasp. A bizarre mixture of sounds came from beneath the table. To Roddy, it sounded like the thrashing machine from his old factory grinding up the skeletal remains of a body that would never be found. The memory of that day made Roddy's stomach turn, and he immediately backed away from the table.

He swiped long fingers across his forehead to wipe away the beading sweat, and began to grumble again. A litany of complaints and epithets about Kal Jerico, Wotan and Yolanda escaped his lips in a matter of seconds.

And then Roddy, overcome by emotion for only the second time in his life, yelled, 'Dammit, Wotan. Why don't you just go and find that scavving Kal Jerico and leave me alone.'

'WOTAN... GO... FIND... Jerico.'

The metal mastiff's ear perked up, which somewhere down in the base of its mechanical brain it knew were nothing more than a bunch of gears responding to a subroutine in its programming that pulled on wires to rotate extraneous flaps on either side of its head back and forth.

But still there was an odd sensation of something akin to relief – almost joy – in hearing that command. Wotan now had a task, a direction to follow – a purpose.

'Find Jerico.'

The command processed across sensors and odd bits of wiring, through solid state transistors, deep down into the salvaged memory core of an ancient construct built in another age for another purpose. Out of that core came more commands. Simple commands like the ear perk and the ensuing tail wag and tongue lick, but also more complex commands that propelled the metal mastiff into action.

Wotan bounded out from beneath the table past the stick-like human cowering by the bar. For some reason that went beyond simple wiring and programming, he stopped and growled at the stick, taking one last snap that caught a square of the man's

trousers and just a small patch of skin.

His mouth opened into a big grin and his tongue, a moistened scrap of rubber that ran on small hydraulic compressors, lolled out to the side as he ran through the swinging door out into the street. Behind him, the door clattered to the ground, ripped off its hinges by the force of the impact, but that didn't concern Wotan.

Another program began running in the background of his metal brain, and he put his nose to the ground to sniff the dirt. The same compressors that moved his tongue now drew air into his body, where it was analyzed in a small compartment in his chest. Mixed in with the remnants of various waste products and the ozone-rich scent of laser fire were wisps of leather and hair gel.

Jerico. Kal Jerico.

Wotan ran off to the left, following the trail. He would find Kal Jerico, and nothing would get in his way. Nothing.

* * *

KAL NEEDED TO find his trousers. While he'd enjoyed the last couple of hours immensely, Sandi still hadn't gotten the chance to show him her much talked about grape trick, and a small niggling doubt had remained at the back of Kal's mind throughout all the shenanigans.

He'd found himself almost disinterested when Brandi and Candi had invited him into a bubble bath. Almost. And really, an entire bath filled with hot, clean water was nearly more exciting than the two voluptuous women lounging amidst the bubbles. That was a luxury you never saw below the Spire, not even in Hive City.

The enticement of getting squeaky clean in a hot bath, while at the same time playing dirty with a blonde and a brunette, proved too much for Kal. But the entire time he spent soaping Brandi's back while Candi ran her wet fingers through his braids and down his chest, he couldn't help thinking back on the last time he and the girls had enjoyed each other's company in this plush and quite comfortable prison.

It was a prison. A prison made to hold Kal Jerico inside, content to never try to leave. He probably could be happy here for a time. Fine, fresh food, clear water with no aftertaste burning the back of your throat, a soft bed, and even softer company; but it

was a prison, and eventually the warden would come calling with a job he needed performed.

So, as the girls slept in the bed, their silk covered breasts rising and falling in a rhythmic and intoxicating dance, Kal pushed his impulses deep down inside and turned away from the bed to look for his trousers. He knew that at any moment Lord Helmawr or, more likely, one of his many lackeys would burst through the locked front door and escort Kal away from his heavenly prison. This time he intended to be dressed.

He eventually found a set of drawers hidden beneath the bed skirt. He eased the first drawer out as Sandi turned over in the bed above him. Her leg slipped off the edge of the bed, bringing her pearl-white thigh dangerously close to Kal's lips. The lilac perfume she wore wafted across his face, practically pulling him into the warmth of her exposed skin.

He shook off the intoxicating effects and closed the drawer. It had been empty. He moved to the next one and tugged on the handle. It didn't budge. He pulled a little harder. Still nothing. Kal braced his foot against the bed and yanked with all his strength. The drawer flew out, almost smacking him in the face. It soared over his head and clattered to the floor behind him, spilling his leather coat and trousers, which had been jammed inside, across the couches far beyond.

Kal glanced up as three heads full of thick, lustrous hair peered over the bed at him. He smiled. 'Good morning again, girls,' he said.

'What are you doing, Kal?' purred Sandi. 'You know you can't leave us, even if you wanted to.' She cocked her head and let a sly smile play across her lips. 'And we know you don't want to.'

Kal scooted away from the bed towards his clothes. It was just a little too tough to bluff the girls without his trousers on. 'It's not that I want to leave,' he said as he reached for the couch. 'I just know that at any moment, I will be pulled away from you.'

Brandi, the blonde, slid out from under the silk sheets and sauntered towards Kal. 'You can stay as long as you like, Kal,' she said. She bounced ever so nicely as she moved. 'You're the master and we're your willing slaves.'

Kal shook his head again and backed away like a wounded

crab. 'That's not exactly true,' he said. His flailing hand finally found the leather trousers draped on the couch behind him. 'The real master here is Lord Helmawr, and we all jump when he says "how high".'

Kal thought about what he just said, and was about to reverse it, when he noticed the girls were no longer advancing upon him. He pulled himself onto the couch and draped the trousers over his lap before glancing over at them.

All three girls sat on the edge of the bed, faces cradled in their hands, crying soft tears and moaning, almost in unison. Kal slipped his legs into the trousers and pulled them up in one swift move as he stood. Snapping the tight, leather leggings around his waist as he crossed the room, Kal stood above the girls.

'What?' he asked, looking from one to the other down the line. 'What's wrong? What did I say?'

For a minute, the girls did nothing but sob quietly into their hands. Kal wanted to reach out and hold them, but worried this might be just another ploy to keep him from getting dressed.

Finally, Candi, the brunette, grabbed an edge of the silk sheets and dried the tears streaming down her face. She looked as if she were about to burst back into tears, when Kal put his hand on her shoulder. She looked up into his face and he could tell that this was no act. The girls were truly distraught, and it had something to do with Lord Helmawr.

Kal looked deep into Candi's big, brown eyes. 'Tell me, Candi,' he said. 'Why are you so sad? What's happened to my father?'

'He's... he's...' she started, but couldn't seem to finish.

Kal sat down beside Candi and swept her into his arms. He held her tight and stroked her hair. 'It's okay,' he said. 'I'm here to help.'

'Lord Helmawr is... dead,' she said at last and began sobbing again.

The other two girls, whose wailing had dwindled to mere weeping, turned on the waterworks again. Kal looked at the three wounded women and knew his work here was just beginning.

ONE SET OF scummers toiled away at the loose panels atop the transport. The rest had hidden themselves amongst the mutant bodies behind the ship. From his vantage point just over a dune in front of the ship, the hooded man couldn't tell which of the rotting bodies hid scummers and which didn't. He had to grudgingly admit that these men were good at their jobs.

But as the scummers continued to peel away the plasteel plating, he began to wonder if this plan would produce the desired results. Using chainswords and the few melta bomb charges in their supplies, the team had made great progress in creating a breach hole. The melta bombs worked well on the plasteel hull, but would have had little effect on the reinforced rear hatch. This was the only way inside and, from his angle, it looked like they would cut through within minutes. If he were in charge of the royal troops, the hooded man wouldn't rush out the back and give up tactical advantage. He'd wait for the hole to open and then fight his way out on to the roof to gain the high ground.

He considered informing the scummer leader of his concerns, but decided not to bother. They would lose more men if that happened, but they would still prevail, and they were just mercenaries; not really anything to be concerned over.

A grinding noise echoed across the dunes as the reinforced hatch opened. Las blasts with accompanying tracers lanced into the mound of ash behind the downed transport. Dust and bits of dead skin and bone vaporized, sending an acrid cloud into the air.

The barrage continued for a full minute before stopping. Kyrian and his men maintained their silent vigil beneath their rotting shields. They were either well trained or dead.

The royal troops unleashed another salvo a moment later. This one lasted only ten seconds before troops began to rush out. They dived and rolled and crawled into defensive positions around the base of the transport. Once in position, the exterior soldiers took up the covering fire as the rest of the squad rushed out and found cover. He counted twenty in all – probably all but the officers.

Still, Kyrian's men held their positions.

The onslaught from the royals continued unabated. They fired in crossing patterns out in three directions from the transport, covering the perimeter with laser blasts and a few explosions.

After two minutes of continuous fire, a command emanated

from inside. The royal troops inched out away from the transport, turned as one to face the ship, and began firing at the roof. An explosion engulfed the air above the transport. The hooded man almost felt sorry for the poor scummers trapped on top. He did not, however, feel anything at all for the royals as the ambush sprung up behind them.

The scummer leader and his men rose up from beneath the dead muties as the royals opened fire on the breach unit. As the explosion ripped through the air, deafening everyone in the area, the mercenaries opened fire. Half of the royals dropped before they even knew they were under attack.

When the other half turned to face their enemy they realized the error of their previous tactics. A fog of ash and burnt flesh lay between them and their attackers. As they fired blindly into the cloud behind the ship, the scummers emerged from the smoke at their sides, having moved to flanking positions after the first volley.

Moments later, the royal troops all lay in the wastes, holes burnt in their chests and heads, their bodily fluids mixing with the ash. The hooded man slid down the dune to the front of the transport.

'Area secured,' said Kyrian, with a certain sarcasm underlying the report, as if the fact was not evident from the carnage surrounding them.

'Good work,' he replied. 'Sorry about your men on top. But sacrifices must be made in battle.'

'Not to worry,' replied the scummer leader, 'I think you will find we suffered no casualties at all.'

Just then, five scummers emerged from the back of the transport, dragging several royal officers behind them.

'Passenger compartment secured,' one reported.

'Excellent work,' replied Kyrian.

The hooded man shook his head. His employers had obviously spared no expense at all on these troops. They had just taken out an entire transport full of royal soldiers with hardly a scratch.

He walked up to one of the royal officers. From the number of bars and medals on the man's uniform, he appeared to be the leader. He motioned to the scummer holding him to pull the officer to his feet.

'Captain,' he said. 'Where's the package?'

'Colonel,' replied the man, trying very hard to puff out his chest

and regain some bit of composure. 'Colonel Shepard. Royal Guard. Serial number one-eight-nine-alpha-gamma-six...'

A huge metallic limb shot out from beneath the folds of the hooded man's cloak and grabbed the colonel. Long, claw-like fingers encircled the officer's neck. Hydraulic gears, metal plating and the hint of a weapon barrel could be seen on his arm, still partially shrouded in the cloak. With a casual flick of his wrist, he snapped the colonel's neck.

As the metal-encased arm disappeared back into the folds of the heavy, grey fabric, he turned to the next officer. 'Captain?' he said. 'Where's the package?'

* * *

VALTIN SCHEMKO, LORD Chamberlain and senior political advisor to Lord Gerontius Helmawr, looked up from the papers spread out on his desk and motioned the man at his door to enter. He welcomed the break from the tedium of his current duties, even though it meant dealing with Kauderer and the latest crisis to hit House Helmawr.

Hermod Kauderer, Master of Security and Intrigue for House Helmawr, swooped into the room like a hawk, which is exactly what the other senior advisors called him when he wasn't around. His angular face, sharp beak of a nose and icy, soulless eyes were more than enough to warrant the nickname, but his tendency to constantly scan his surroundings, as if searching for his next meal, was what really tended to put people on edge around him. Everyone feared Kauderer and what he could do to them with the information he supposedly had stored in his impenetrable office.

Everyone, that is, except Valtin. The two men had come to an understanding after some recent unpleasanties involving spies working right under Kauderer's slightly hooked nose. Kauderer had also dispatched a rogue spyer unit into the Underhive at the time to further his own agenda. That unit nearly killed Valtin as he helped his uncle – one Kal Jerico – hunt down another Helmawr relative who had stolen vital information from the old man.

The fact that Valtin now possessed that intel and Kauderer did not had gone a long way to cementing his current political position as well as his ability to handle Kauderer without fear.

Valtin gestured to the chair in front of his desk. The house spy glared back at the Lord Chamberlain and, to his credit, only hesitated a moment before sitting. Kauderer enjoyed using his height to intimidate, so rarely sat in meetings. Valtin had broken him of that habit, at least in his presence.

'I can tell by the look on your face, Hermod, that all does not go well with our rescue efforts,' said Valtin. In fact, he could never read Kauderer's expression, as he had incredible control over his hawkish features. But with Kauderer, it was always a good bet that he came bearing bad news.

'As usual, you are correct, Lord Chamberlain,' said Kauderer. 'The last report from the transport suggested a renewed attack. The message was somewhat garbled. I have my best men working to decipher the text.'

Valtin wasn't sure, but he could have sworn Kauderer's hands fidgeted just below the top of the desk. Kauderer detested uncertainty when it came to information. Valtin allowed himself an inward smile at seeing a crack in the man's icy demeanour.

'More muties?' asked Valtin. 'I'm sure the colonel's men can handle those barbarians and their scavenged arsenal.'

'It is unclear, my lord,' said Kauderer.

Was that a twitch in his left eye? The stress seemed to finally be getting to Kauderer.

'The colonel reported increased efforts to breach the hull,' continued Kauderer. 'The transmission ended abruptly after that.'

Valtin ran his fingers over his recently grown goatee as he digested this new information. He had to admit he had no idea what to make of the situation, which forced him to relinquish some control of the conversation back to Kauderer.

'What is your assessment, Hermod?' he asked. 'What's going on down there?'

Kauderer's shoulders rose and straightened slightly, and it seemed his haughty demeanour took on a bit more shine. 'I believe whoever shot down our transport has now arrived to claim their prize.'

Damn,' said Valtin. 'How did this happen? What happened to security?'

Kauderer's glare returned briefly. 'Security on our end was airtight,' he said. 'I handled the negotiations myself, and no one outside this office even knew what was in that package.'

'The merchant, then?'

Kauderer nodded. 'We paid him a noble's ransom for his silence, but we have limited control of off-world merchants. He must have talked.'

'This would point, I assume, to one of the other houses?' said Valtin, stroking his goatee again. 'No one else in the spire would have the resources and no one outside Hive Primus would have a motive. What steps are you taking?'

'I have agents on the way to interrogate the merchant,' said Kauderer. 'He'll tell us what he knows, and then serve as an example to others to never cross House Helmawr.'

'And the package?' said Valtin. 'How close are Katerin and his men? Will they reach the transport in time to secure the package?'

Kauderer shook his head. 'It's impossible to tell. All will depend on how long the colonel can hold out and how determined our enemies are to thwart us.'

Valtin nodded. 'Keep me informed,' he said. 'I want to know the moment Katerin enters the transport.' He looked down at the guest lists and table assignments spread out across his desk and shuddered at the thought of returning to that task.

'We need that package, Hermod,' he said, looking back up and staring at the house spy. 'The survival of House Helmawr depends upon it. There is precious little time. The Kal Jerico gambit will only buy us so much.'

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