

NECROMUNDA UNDERHIVE

UNCUT SHORT STORIES

By Jonathan Green

N is for Nathan Creed

The Battle for Dome Seven-Seven-Three

Pit Fight

Spider Daemon

Medicine Man

Retribution

Urban Legend

Published on the *Jonathan Green, author* blog:
<http://jonathangreenauthor.blogspot.com/>

Saturday, 16 April 2011 – Friday 22 April 2011

& Friday, 27 August 2010 footnote*

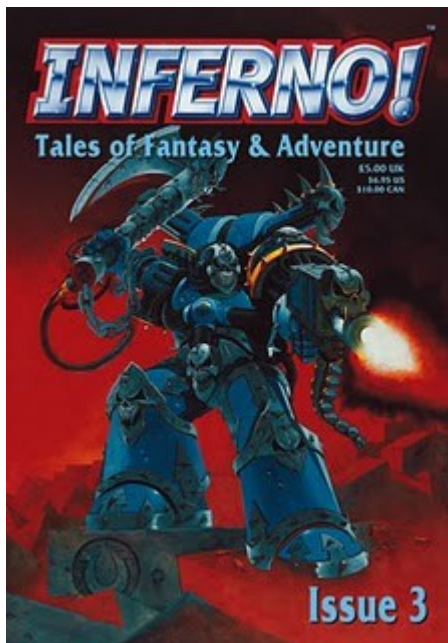
* Somebody once complained that I was so vain as to name Nathan Creed after myself, the similarities with the name Jonathan Green being so obvious. Well obvious to all but me at the time. The Creed part of the name came from James Herbert's novel of the same name and I just thought the name Nathan sounded quite cool at the time. Perhaps it was a subconscious referencing of my own name, but it certainly wasn't a conscious one.

N IS FOR NATHAN CREED

Nathan Creed is a bounty hunter from the pollution-ruined hive world of Necromunda, a setting created for the game of the same name by Games Workshop in 1995.

Necromunda is a planet dominated by the mountain-sized cities that are separated by toxic ash deserts. The atmosphere of the planet is a poisonous fog and the spires of the vast hives are so tall that they pierce the stratosphere. It's a fantastic setting – a cross between the Wild West (complete with gunslingers and tribes of Ratskins) and the dystopia of urban decay gone mad (with rogue cyborgs wandering deserted city-domes miles across).

Nathan Creed himself started out as a rather one-dimensional character. He is Lee Van Cleef, Clint Eastwood, The Man With No Name and John Wayne all rolled into one, and thrust into a frontier, crumbling sprawl of urban decay in an almost medieval universe. He's a sharp shooter, a chancer, a charmer, a smoker, a drinker and a mean son of a Ripperjack who always gets his man, mutant, zombie or rogue psyker. He had a great line in put-downs, always having the last word in any matter, usually because everyone else was dead.



Creed didn't really develop as a character until I began to expand his world, building a cast of characters around him, who started to act as foils to the bounty hunter. So detailed did this background become over the next few stories, and in my ideas notebook, that I actually planned to pitch a Creed story as my first novel for the Black Library, but unfortunately it was not to be, and the story of a Genestealer Cult breeding and scheming in the depths of Hive Primus remains untold.*

The first Nathan Creed short story *Bad Spirits* appeared in *Inferno!* #3 (1997) and was ultimately re-printed in the Necromunda short story anthology *Status: Deadzone* (2000).

Mama's Boys (2000) followed three years later and *Boyz in the Hive* (2001) - in which Creed goes up against an Ork, and which introduced the character of Doc

Haze - not long after.

The fourth Nathan Creed story was *Firestarter!* (2001) and was re-printed in the 40K anthology *Crucible of War* (2003). Creed's last outing in *Inferno!* was *Bad Medicine* (2002)** and introduced a couple of characters who I planned to have appear in other stories - Creed's girlfriend Maisy-Lou (a.k.a. Crazy Maisy) and the Corpsemaker - but it was not to be. I pitched further tales (including an origin story) but for some reason they weren't picked up.



* When BL attempted to revive the Necromunda setting in their fiction line I was disappointed not to be asked to contribute a Creed novel, but I was busy writing for Abaddon Books by then.

** Writing this now, I can barely believe that it's almost ten years since I wrote the last Creed story!

But the Nathan Creed story doesn't end there. In 2003 Games Workshop re-published the Necromunda games system in one book as *Necromunda Underhive*. I was commissioned to write some short pieces of colour text, each highlighting different aspects of the setting.

I managed to link all of the (very) short stories so that each one led into the next, even though they featured different characters. I even managed to write one involving Scuzman Veck, a pit slave I created for the Necromunda comic strip *Slavebreak!*

However, the editor didn't really appreciate what I'd attempted to do, and asked me to re-write the stories so that they weren't interconnected. In the end not all of them appeared in the book didn't appear in the right order anyway. The effect was lost, including the story that resurrected bounty hunter Nathan Creed.

Not all of the Nathan Creed *Inferno!* stories were re-printed in anthologies but if you're a fan, or fancy reading them having read this post, I have it on good authority that they will be seeing the light of day in the second Necromunda Omnibus (although I'm not sure when that's due out). The first one is available now as part of BL's Print on Demand range.

And I've decided*** that I'm going to make my Necromunda Underhive stories available again, on this blog, over the next few days - and as originally intended.



Boyz in the Hive

by Des Hanley



Firestarter!

by Des Hanley



Bad Medicine

by Des Hanley

I had already written two Nathan Creed adventures before Des Hanley became connected with the series, but from *Boyz in the Hive* onwards he was the unofficial Creed artist. It's a shame there weren't any more Creed stories because I would like to have seen more of Des's images.

*** Again, during the course of writing this post...

THE BATTLE FOR DOME SEVEN-SEVEN-THREE

Gunfire raked the grilled metal walkway, suspended high over the rutted and crater-pocked, slag-waste floor of the dome, on heavy-linked chains. Shotgun shells spanging off the metal gangway, last-bolts leaving molten pinholes in the handrails and flicking flakes of rust from the corroded metal pipe, the ganger, hunkered down to make himself as small a target as possible, scurried over the fragile, giddily swinging bridge to safety behind a sturdy pillar, several metres in diameter.

Back in cover, slamming another energy cell into his own laspistol, Vito Scald, leader of the Orlock gang known as Scald's Hotheads, darted a glance around the iron pillar he was sheltering behind and took in his gang's disposition around the dome in an instant. His men – juves, gangers, heavies, all – were scattered around and over the ruined structures of the derelict dome, as were their rivals for the territory, the muscle-bound, meathead Goliaths of the Ironfist Gang.

Dome Seven-Seven-Three, also known as Kasto's Claim, was a ruin with nothing to offer an ambitious gang on the make, home now only to Ripperjacks and other hive vermin. But Dome Seven-Seven-Three was the prize nonetheless, for it was the gateway to the mineral and ore rich seams of the Fingel's Rift.

Scald's Hotheads were armed with a hotchpotch of weapons, from autoguns and serrated-edged knives to flamers and even the occasional heavy weapon. Life had been good to them of late and they had been able to get hold of the best armaments money could buy in Mercury Falls. And slowly but surely they were prevailing against the apparently more robust opponents. It was quite simply a case of brains over brawn, Vito considered.

Suddenly an Orlock braced against a twisted spar, jutting up from the broken ground twenty metres below, was enveloped in a ball of incandescent fire. Screaming like a stuck face-eater, the burning young man fell writhing to the ground. Vito looked to where the fireball had originated and saw the hulking, steroid-boosted form of a renegade pit slave.

The cybernetically-enhanced monster still had Guild ownership studs implanted in his skull, just as he still sported the over-sized, piston-driven rock-hammer that replaced his right arm. In fact, he appeared to be more machine than man, much of his body supported by a crude exoskeleton. In his remaining hand the pit slave held a recharging plasma gun, its coils glowing blue with building energy. Vito recognised the outlaw pit slave, as one Crusher Harlon, from bounty flyers he had seen posted around the trading post of Fluke's Breach.

There was the rattling roar of a heavy stubber as Big Aldo located the pit slave in his sights. Sparks flew where stub gun shells impacted against the metal portions of the slave and blood sprayed where they hit what flesh remained. Such a hail of bullets would have killed any other ganger where he stood but it only caused the pit slave to stagger backwards as his unnaturally augmented body soaked up the barrage of bullets. But that in itself was enough.

As Harlon was forced back by Aldo's stubber assault, one iron-shod foot slid over the slime-slick lip of a steaming chem-pit. The top-heavy slave lost his balance and toppled backwards into the lurid, acid-yellow sludge with a gloopy splash. It seemed to Vito that the toxic soup began to boil and putrid, gaseous smoke rose in clouds from the chem-pit.

Suddenly an acid-blackened figure lurched out of the pit and fell to the ground, spasming fitfully. It took Vito a moment to realise that it was the pit slave's scorched exoskeleton and bionic attachments, all that was left of Crusher Harlon.

With the death of the pit slave the Ironfist gang really was in trouble and Vito could see, by his ugly grimacing expression, that the Goliaths' leader, Nastrol Skedge, knew it. Now was Vito's chance, to not only claim Kasto's Claim for himself but to bring down the mighty Nastrol 'The Executioner' Skedge, at the same time. Laspistol on rapid-auto Vito ran out from cover bellowing with one adrenalin-fuelled yell of joy and fighting frenzy.

A retina-searing bolt of energy streaked past him with a shrieking hiss as it burnt a path through the air, leaving behind it the tinny smell of ozone. The las-bolt sliced cleanly through a link in one of the chains supporting the walkway twenty metres above the fragmented floor of the dome. The grilled gangway listed badly. Robbed of one support, the extra strain placed on another corroded bolt finally became too much and the pin sheared.

Vito suddenly found the world dropping away before him and one end of the walkway swung downwards, and the rubble-strewn dome floor rushed up to meet him as he was thrown forward into empty space.

As he plummeted groundward, the Orlock caught sight of the leather coated, bald-headed figures that had entered the dome. The fight for Dome Seven-Seven-Three was far from over, but for Vito Scald it was.

PIT FIGHT

Welcome, fight fans, to the twenty-seventh All-Comers Fight Fest, here at the To-The-Death Arena. Boy, have we got a treat in store for you tonight? The pit fight to end all pit fights. We've got Piledriver. We've got Ramrod Rameses. We've got the Head-Harvester. We've got Ghyarotha, the Ratskin Savage. We've got monstrous mutant Milliasaurs, hungry Scalies and the biggest rat-beast you've seen this side of the Effluous. Who will leave as our Lord of the Spire and who will leave in a body bag? It's all here, fight fans! At the twenty-seventh All-Comers Fight Fest!

Nastrol Skedge opened his eyes and looked around him. Nothing had changed. It was the same nightmare situation he had awoken to after those slime-sucking snakes of Delaques had turned betrayer on the Ironfists. Unbelievably, his Goliath gang were being beaten by those snivelling dogs of Vito Scald's when the Network had turned up, emerging like mirror-eyed ghosts seemingly from nowhere.

At first Sisken and his Delaques had leant their firepower to help the Ironfists bring down Scald's Hotheads but as soon as that threat had been eliminated, they turned on the Goliaths. Skedge himself had been buried under a collapsing bulkhead and was taken alive, only to be sold to the notorious Guildier Phelonius Carbonyne to become one of his pit fighting slaves, fodder for the endless bouts of his bloodthirsty entertainments.

Skedge's head ached like someone had rammed an electrode into his brain, as indeed they had: several electrodes, in fact.

'Stop squirming,' the techno grumbled. 'If you want me to get this saw unclogged and working again before the next round you'd better sit still!'

Skedge looked up into the man's eyes, or rather eye – the other having been replaced by a red bionic implant – and scowled. The techno was bald and wiry, and reminded Skedge of the traitorous Delaques. The Goliath's shoulder and back ached from where the monstrous buzz-saw arm had been grafted onto his body and bolted to his spinal column, his left arm having already been brutally removed. The flesh around his newly-implanted ownership studs was still red-raw too.

'Are you done over there yet, Lazlo?' asked one of the other pit slaves sitting waiting inside the plasteel-walled bunker. He had a grease-black topknot of hair, a Guild skull tattoo on his left shoulder and a huge hydraulic claw in place of his right arm.

'I will be if this muscle-head stops twitching worse than a Ratskin overdosing on Spook,' the techno complained.

'Don't talk about our potential associate like that, Lazlo,' the claw-armed pit slave chided, a broad grin on his face.

'By the black Abyss, what are you talking about?' Skedge growled, speaking for the first time since he had entered the bunker after eviscerating half a dozen scavvy mutants in the last round. 'We're slated to fight in the next round!'

'We're breaking out of here,' the pit slave said. 'Let me introduce myself. The name's Scuzman Veck. I and my friends here,' he took in the other cyborgs in the sweaty gloom of the bunker with a sweep of his claw, 'have had enough of living life at stinking Phelonius Carbonyne's pleasure. So, after the third round...'

This is it, fight fans, the one you've all been waiting for. Scuzman Veck's Meat Grinders against the Executioner and the Beast of Broken Spar, Ghyarotha. You won't see the like of this grudge-match again in a long time. Place your bets and remember, when the klaxon goes the blood flows!

The roar of the ground was deafening. Underhivers packed the stands of the arena, all eager to see the pit slaves slaughter each other in new and messily interesting ways. Scuzman Veck and his crew were lined up on the other side of the rust-stained ash floor of the fighting pit with Skedge and the drugged-up Ratskin brute they were calling the Beast of Broken Spar facing them.

Through narrowed eyes, Skedge could see the obese warty bulk of Phelonius Carbonyne squatting like a fat, albino toad on his servitor-carried palanquin within his own private arena box. Diesel engines roared and oily black smoke belched into the air as the pit slaves fired up their tool-weapons. The crowd roared even louder, in expectation of the bloodshed to come. If the plan was to work they had to make this look convincing...

Don't panic, fight fans! Don't panic! Everything is under control! Please remain calm and return to your seats. Everything is under con-... fzzz... krzzz... You can't come in here! Get out! Hey, watch that power ca-... sprzzzz...skzzz... Get out, everybody! For skav's sake, didn't you hear me? Run while you still can!

Underhivers scattered before him as he powered towards them, sweeping the whirling blur of his buzz saw before him. Exhilaration running through him, Nastrol Skedge came to halt outside the arena gates and looked around him. They had done it. Skav, but they had done it! Well, at least he had done it. He could hear Scuzman Veck still cursing, trapped by the press of Guilder guards in the arena behind him. But Nastrol Skedge was free!

SPIDER DEMON

The hunter watched as the bionically altered figure trudged onwards through the metal forest of collapsed scaffolding, punctuated now and then by a fallen monolithic slab of rockcrete. Prey, the hunter thought. Prey for the hunt.

* * * * *

Hearing the crunching footsteps getting nearer, Nesting Python remained perfectly still where he lay on the flat girder beam over the Ratskin path that wound through the ash dunes, so as not to give his position away to whoever, or whatever, it was that approached. He had felt the clumping footsteps before he had even heard them and it had given them all the time he needed to get into position.

Whatever it was that had strayed into his tribe's territory was unknowingly about to become his prey. Its head would become the trophy by which he would prove he had passed the Rite of First Blood and earned the right to be recognised as a warrior of the Redsnake Tribe, a brave no longer. Feeling the juddering stomping even up on the beam, Nesting Python curled his forefinger around the trigger of his handbow.

Then his prey rounded the side of a rockcrete boulder and the young Ratskin baulked. His potential prey was an ugly, hugely-muscled, mohican-haired monster, half-man and half-machine, like something from one of the ghost legends of his people.

But, Nesting Python considered, if he brought down a monster such as this he would earn the respect of even the most hardened warriors of his tribe and Purple Moss would be the one wooing him rather than spurning his advances, as she had done ever since they were children.

Athletically, and silent as methane mist, the Ratskin swung down from the girder, depressing the trigger of his handbow as he did so. The dart flew true and struck the hulking, buzz saw-armed fiend squarely in the chest. Nesting Python landed in a crouch in front of the man-machine, but rather than finding himself facing a dying enemy he was now face-to-face with an enraged beast. Could it be that the creature was somehow immune to the Widowmaker venom he had tipped his arrowheads with?

The man-machine's flesh and blood fist struck him like an iron fist and sent him flying. As Nesting Python scrambled in the dirt for his handbow, his erstwhile prey fired up its jagged-toothed saw blade.

Sudden as a striking ash-viper, something dropped from the darkness above them on a glittering line and, before the cyborg could take another step, thrust half-metre long steel claws through skin, metal, muscle and bone in one grinding scream of a thrust. Vomiting blood, the man-machine was hoisted into the air so that its iron-shod feet dangled just above the ground.

Nesting Python only caught a glimpse of this new insectoid, chitinous spine-armoured, bulbous-eyed creature before it disappeared back into the darkness, pulling the man-machine's heavy body with it, but it was enough. He knew what it was that had saved his life and it made him feel sick to his stomach.

Spider Daemon, the brave thought, and with that Nesting Python picked himself up and ran.

* * * * *

High on a narrow platform jutting from the concave curving wall of the dome, the Malcadon Spyre Hunter added the Goliath's head to the carefully arranged pile it had collected since the hunt had begun. Twelve so far, and many more where they had come from. Prey just waiting for the kill.

MEDICINE MAN

The flickering emerald flames of the fire illuminated just this one tiny corner of the vast sump-dome, drawing an eerie luminescence from the photo-reactive fungi coating the stalactites of ore-deposits suspended from the roof of the cavernous dome. They in turn cast shimmering, rainbow reflections on the oily sheen of the surface of the polluted lake where it lapped at the ferro-rockrete shore. The eerie copper-green firelight also under lit the Ratskin Shaman's angular features, lending them an even more harshly cold and knife-like quality. The spiral tattoos on his cheeks seemed to swirl in the ever-changing light.

The shaman was clad in the garb of a tribal medicine man of the feral peoples of Necromunda. The rat bones strung to his ceremonial armour knocked against each other as he moved, the hollow sound eerily echo-amplified. From his waist hung the pelt of a giant rat, the same rat whose skull now adorned the top of his shaman's staff. He had a pointed goatee of a beard and from his pierced ears hung tiny archeotech artefacts. Such relics helped him to commune with the Hive Spirits and here, in the uninhabited dome, in the 'natural' environment of the toxic waste zones of the Underhive, he could commune with those same spirits more closely.

Casting a handful of Scarlet Feng spores into the fire, the shaman began his invocation, as thick, foul-smelling orange smoke poured from the fire of burning fungus stalks.

'Great Spirits of the Hive,' the Ratskin intoned. 'Once again our sacred lands have been desecrated by the hivers and evil drawn down upon us. Our hunters have become the hunted, slain by the Spider Daemon in its quest for fresh souls. Your humble servant, Quaking Dome, beseeches you to aid us now, o mighty masters of Hive Primus, the true Lords of the Spire. Send your terrible judgement down upon the defilers. Let the sacrilegious and the blasphemous know the wrath of your retribution,' the medicine man chanted, throwing a handful of grey-black grit into the flames. Picking up his staff he rattled it over the now sparking purple blaze. 'By the Hive Spirits, may it be so.'

Quaking Dome was suddenly aware of movement nearby. Looking beyond the fire he peered into the gloom over the lake. Sparkling diamonds eyes looked back at him. He felt the hackles on the back of his neck rise. At the same time he heard the rippling surge out on the lake of something moving towards him over the oily surface.

Raft spiders, hundreds of them, were gliding over the filthy water on spindly, crab-legs, their bodies white and glistening. Hearing a skittering sound above him the shaman looked up. Scuttling down the sides of the dome above him were yet more arachnids. These were covered in coarse black and crimson hair and were as large as dogs. The spiders moved as one, as if guided by one will. Then they stopped, every single one of them, none encroaching within the circle of light cast by the flickering fire. The shaman's prayers had been answered.

Smiling like a snake, Quaking Dome got to his feet and walked unhesitatingly towards the mass of furry and slime-wet bodies. The arachnids parted before him and then surged in behind him to follow the shaman as he strode towards the tunnel that would take him out of the sacred dome and back towards the settlements of the hivers. Soon the desecrators would know what vengeance was, when the wrath of the Hive Spirits was visited upon them.

RETRIBUTION

The settlement of Lucky Break burned. Crimson and vermilion flames rose high into the still air of the dome. Above the burning holestead lights flickered, through the smoke, against the ceiling of the dome in a myriad constellations, looking so much like the night sky that untold millions inhabiting the mighty mountain city of Hive Primus would never see. Figures moved amidst the flames, scarlet shadows spewing sanctified death from their holy weapons, roasting penitents and sinners alike in the Emperor's purifying fires of retribution.

Coughing violently, her lungs full of acrid fumes, Crazy Maisy dodged a blundering, smoke-blinded hiver and ducked into cover behind a large water butt. A few more hacking paroxysms and the coughing fit passed. All around her was chaos and confusion as holesteaders ran to and fro through the streets of the gambling town, with no idea where they were going. Splashing her face with the stagnant, green-skinned soup that passed for water in the huge barrel, Maisy tried to locate the rest of the gang.

The Hive Tigers had only come to Lucky Break for a bit of rest and relaxation, after collecting on the Graff Brothers contract, but rather than a couple of night's fun at the gaming tables and winding up the locals in the drinking dens, instead they had found themselves in the middle of a Redemptionist Crusade! She had met and dealt with the insane devotees of House Cawdor before, but these Redemptionists were madder than she was.

There had to be an easier way for a girl to make a living than this, she thought. The saloon-girls of Lucky Break had certainly seemed to be enjoying the high life – that was until the Redemption had showed up in town.

Maisy could hear someone shouting over the screams of the terrified populace and the roaring conflagration. It was a man's voice, booming and authoritative, as if its owner was used to being obeyed, no matter what, and one that had total conviction in the message it preached.

'It is your foul living that brought the spider plague upon us,' the voice proclaimed, 'your debauchery that summoned the swarms of flies, your lack of faith that made the mould harvest fail, your ungodliness that caused the Ratskins to rise against us! So sayeth His most holy Apostle Cinnabar!'

Maisy suddenly found herself caught up in the press of panicking gamblers, bar-girls, prospectors, and hired scum trying to flee the town. She tried to elbow her way out of the pack, which, bizarrely, actually seemed to be carrying her towards the so far unseen preacher. Then suddenly the mob parted and the Escher girl stumbled, ending up on her knees in front of scuffed and scratched black rat-hide boots.

She let his gaze rise and took in first the frayed, once golden hem of a robe, then its soot-blackened, once crimson, heavy sackcloth folds, the racking slide shotgun holstered in a sturdy gun-belt, the bandolier loaded with wide-calibre shells, and the scorch-muzzled flamer, its pilot light a needle of brilliant blue flame, the air around it shimmering with heat-haze. The man's face was covered by a polished, ebony devil-mask carved with a leering, unseemly expression. Behind the lunatic priest stood his anonymously-masked and cowed followers.

The Apostle Cinnabar in turn looked down at the purple-haired girl ganger, clad in laced-up leather trousers and pink nylon crop top, with undisguised disgust, as if she were the cultist of some unspeakable, carnally-obsessed deity.

‘Tempter!’ the gargoyle-masked man screamed at her, unexpectedly. ‘How dare you prostrate yourself before the Apostle Cinnabar, Harbinger of the Holy Redemption, offering yourself to him like some voluptuous incarnation of man’s most wanton and base desires?’

What was this guy like? ‘You don’t want to do this,’ Maisy hissed, feeling her cheeks reddening with angry heat.

‘Vile harlot! Prepare to be judged by the weight of your own sins!’ the slaverling Apostle screamed, turning the nozzle of his flamer on her.

One concentrated thought was all it took. The Apostle Cinnabar went hurtling ten metres backwards, smashing aside his zealot lackeys in his flight. Maisy didn’t know how she did it, just that she could. It was a talent she had, that was all she could describe it as, a talent that had saved her from certain death more times than she cared to remember. The surrounding crowd gasped and before anybody else noticed, Crazy Maisy was gone.



URBAN LEGEND

‘Now I know what you’re asking yourself,’ the bounty hunter said, taking a cheroot from a crumpled packet, that had been secreted in one pocket of his long leather coat, and lighting it, all the while keeping the wide-calibre stub gun trained on the Van Saar. ‘What you’re wondering is, did he fire eleven shots or twelve? Well, do you fancy finding out?’

Narve Vanderacken didn’t say anything but moved his hand away from the autopistol lying on the plate metal floor only a few centimetres from his fingertips. He could feel cold sweat beading on his brow and trickling into his greying beard. How had it all come to this? What had started off as a straightforward hunt for a piece of tech, stolen by those Emperor-cursed Escher gangers the Hive Tigers, and a bike chase along Thunder Road, one of the few remaining stretches of navigable highway in the Underhive, had ended up with half his gang killed in a flash-flood of industrial waste, no doubt caused by a discharge from the manufactories of Hive City far above, and Vanderacken himself being pursued across half the Rust Sand Desert by one of the most ruthless and notorious hired guns in the sector, with a reputation that reached from Toxic Sump to Steel Canyon.

Vanderacken looked up at the bounty hunter, the brim of his hat hiding his eyes, silhouetted against the fitfully flickering, red-glowing hazard beacon, that also cast its ruddy light over the scuffed and scored yellow and black diagonals of the factory barn’s loading berths. Nathan Creed, gunslinger, bounty hunter and downhive desperado, took a long drag on the smouldering cheroot and reached into the folds of his coat again. This time he pulled out a black metal sphere, bisected into two hemispheres by a knurled ring. Vanderacken swallowed hard. It was the Inferno device: the stolen piece of tech that had got them all into this mess in the first place.

‘I found this in the smoking ruins of what used to be the gambling hole of Lucky Break,’ the bounty hunter’s voice was a distinctive downhive drawl, ‘thanks to a tip-off from a half-breed, who bought his freedom with the information he gave me, and something the good Doc Haze knocked up for me in his workshop.’

Creed tossed the sphere into the air, making the Van Saar wince, and then caught it deftly in his gloved hand. Vanderacken gulped audibly. In a split second he made his decision: it was now or never. The Van Saar made a lunge for the autopistol and rolled sideways as his hand closed around it. The last of the twelve-shooter’s dum-dum bullets impacted against the floor with a metallic ringing. ‘Damn!’ he cursed.

The bounty hunter dived for cover as a chattering hail of autopistol rounds tore apart the fungus wood crates that he had been standing in front of only moments before. He landed heavily, sliding to a halt behind a crane gantry.

‘Now what you should be asking yourself,’ Vanderacken declared, barely able to contain his new-found mirth at this reversal of fortunes, ‘is how you’re going to get out of here alive now that you’re effectively unarmed and I’m the one holding the loaded gun.’

‘Is that so?’ came Creed’s retort from behind the loading assembly. ‘You know what?’ he went on. ‘What you don’t realise is that I was never after you or this infernal Inferno Device to begin with. I only got involved when you and your boys started using me for target practice.’

‘Okay. So I guess we were both just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.’ Vanderacken’s tone was deadly serious now, as serious as a hivequake. ‘Now give me the device.’

‘I don’t have it,’ came the husky drawl.

‘What do you mean, you don’t –’ It was then that sudden, harsh realisation struck the Van Saar ganger, like a speeding motorbike. ‘Oh shi –’

The sub-sonic explosion shook the factory to its very foundations. What glass remained in its high, gothic-arched windows was blown out in a hail of diamond splinters. Crane pylons came crashing down in a cacophonous clattering crash, while the shockwave buckled the steel plates of the floor, sending barrels and drums bouncing away along the length of the building.

As Narve Vanderacken clawed his way out of the pile of twisted wreckage where he had landed, his body below the waist a bloody mess of pulped bone and tissue, Nathan Creed calmly strode towards him.

‘I told you,’ the bounty hunter said crouching down next to the dying ganger, his voice barely more than a whisper, ‘you shouldn’t have got me involved. I’m bad news. The worst. But seeing as I’ve got your undivided attention perhaps you can help me after all. You wouldn’t happen to know the whereabouts of one outlaw pit slave, arsonist and Guild caravan hijacker, who goes by the name of Crusher Harlon, would you?’