



Kraft could feel the eyes of the gangers on him, a near-palpable crawling sensation that trickled down his back along with his cold sweat. He crouched, waiting, his hand opening and closing on the haft of the knife at his belt. Across from him, at the other side of the five-meter circle defined by grinning synthleather-jacketed figures, the big ork smiled, showing yellowed tusks. "You ready, omae?" His voice was deceptively friendly, silken-smooth. His eyes bore the telltale jerkiness of the habitual cram user.

Kraft didn't answer. He knew he only had one advantage, and he'd better use it if he wanted to get out of here alive. In a quicksilver motion none of the gangers could follow, he drew and lunged at the ork. The knife's blade flashed in the warehouse's dim overhead light.

Fast as Kraft was, the ork was ready. He sidestepped—not without difficulty—and planted an oversized boot in the middle of Kraft's ass, sending him sprawling. By the time the laughing, shouting gangers had grabbed him and shoved him back into the center, the ork had his own knife out. In his other hand he held a length of chain he'd produced from somewhere. Kraft swallowed hard, his mind racing, knowing he'd now lost the element of surprise. Calm down ... you're still faster than he is ...

The two circled, predatory cats sizing each other up in a stinking urban jungle. Once, one of the gangers made a move behind Kraft, but the ork waved him off with a warning growl. This one was obviously personal. "You wanna deal with the Hardcases," he'd said, "You gotta go through Meltdown first. Then maybe we talk." He flicked the chain out, forcing Kraft to back off.

Kraft hung back, slowing his breathing and making himself concentrate. Meltdown's chain snaked out again, clipping him in the shoulder, taunting rather than hurting. "You ain't got the hez to swab our drekkers, Pinky. Whyn'cha get outta here and go back to screwin' yer mommy?"

All thought of care or prudence flew from Kraft's mind, replaced by red rage at the dripping contempt in the ork's voice. He flung himself forward, ducking neatly under knife and chain and slashing at Meltdown's belly. His cry of triumph was almost as loud as the ork's startled yell of pain as he connected. Blood sprayed hot and red across his face and he flashed a fierce grin. That would teach this ganger scum to—

The world exploded into pain as Meltdown's big fist came down on the back of his neck, dropping him in a heap like a broken doll. The gangers' yells muted instantly to indistinct babble in his ringing head. The ork, his belly wound bloody but blunted by his leather jacket, stood over Kraft with a look that mixed venom with a kind of mad ecstasy. "That was a mistake, Pinky," he roared. He raised his knife.

Once more an explosion echoed around the metal confines of the warehouse—this time originating not in Kraft's head, but from somewhere near the building's entrance. Automatic weapons fire. A series of neat holes appeared—one, two, three—in the middle of Meltdown's chest and, following an almost comical look of surprise, the ork proceeded to do a fine imitation of his name. "Nobody else move!" boomed a voice—a blessedly familiar voice—and then the rest of the gangers were scattering from their fallen leader like rats leaving a sinking ship.

Kraft, from his spot on the floor, grinned. "Didn't anybody tell you guys not to bring knives to a gunfight?" he murmured right before he passed out.