

JUDGE DREDD

WHITEOUT

BY JAMES SWALLOW



In the nightmarish future of Mega-City One, the Judges are all that holds the teeming citizens from anarchy. Dredd is one such man - judge, jury and executioner. In his latest adventure, Dredd tries to put a stop to Wess Smyth, a small time hood who has stumbled across the Skorpion: an unstable and powerful cybernetic firearm. Can Dredd prevent a deadly crime wave in this ripping SF escapade?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

James Swallow has previously written adventures for the heroes of 2000 AD in the *Judge Dredd Magazine*, the novels *Judge Dredd: Eclipse* and *Rogue Trooper: Blood Relative*, and the audio dramas *Dreddline*, *Jihad* and *Grud is Dead*. He has also written a number of other novels, including the *Sundowners* series and *The Butterfly Effect*. He lives in London.

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It had been hunting them for three days, non-stop, day and night. A ghost in the shadows of the twisted wasteland around them, appearing only in the moments before it struck out and killed. As one, the ragged cadre of Mutancheros who formed Happy Bruce's murderous band had decamped from the rubble-strewn ruins of the Boulder Pebbles and fled southwards, toward what they believed would be the relative safety of the Denver Death Zone. To be precise, that was what they had done after Happy's head had popped like a yellow-skinned balloon, there in the middle of his speech about how they'd find this invisible maggot and crush him like a munce bud.

Before Happy's messy death, right there in the middle of their camp, right there surrounded by eighteen of his hardest, most unpleasant banditios, the gang were in relatively upbeat spirits about killing the interloper. A couple of the newbies, the kids Happy had forcibly recruited from the ghetto settlement at Leadville, had been the first to go. Both of them died real quiet like, nothing but a hot hiss of molten flesh and steaming blood-vapour to announce their ends. Derek the Teeth saw the killer moving like liquid mercury across the stonework over their

heads. His whistle had roused everyone, but in that few seconds the figure was gone.

Derek liked to think he knew something about everything, and he insisted that the wet-nosed boys had been murdered by Gila-Munja, the claw-handed tribe of malformed killers that terrorised the Western Ranges; Happy had, quite correctly, pointed out that Gila-Munja didn't use energy weapons because they lacked the opposable thumbs to even pick the damn things up, to which Derek had mouthed off, only to get Happy's fist in his mouth. While they were fighting, a third and then a fourth beam shot had taken the lives of High Hand Freddie and his buddy Lester. About that time, panic had set in.

So they ran and scattered for a while, finally regrouping in the usual place, the artificial cavern formed when the Boulder SupaMall had collapsed in on itself during the Atom War. In the hollowed-out chamber, the slagged remnants of high-fashion stores and food court franchises had melted into a post-nuclear frieze. There were arcane symbols and words across the walls that had no meaning to Happy's illiterate troupe, and dead norms still sealed under sheathes of molten plexi-plasteen, coated in floods of the see-through plastic in the seconds after Boulder had been air-burst by Sov MIRV warheads. Happy sat on the Fat Guy, the preserved corpse of a rotund fellow who had been on his hands and knees when the nuke strike came, reaching for a TasteeBurger that had dropped off his tray. The dead man's bulk formed a natural podium from which Happy could expound to his gang.

Happy got his name from his head; it was a bloated fleshy sphere in jaundice-yellow with black, beady eyes and a mouth that was far wider than it should have been. His mutation kept his lips in a permanent smirk of amusement, even in moments like this one, when he was angry and quite afraid. Happy brought himself up to his full height and started to rant about the unseen killer. Days earlier, the Mutancheros had swept down on a band of hapless Helltrekkers out of the Big Meg and killed everyone they could. It had been poor pickings and Happy was sure that some of the norms had got away. This, he reasoned, was who had killed Lester, Freddie and the others: the survivors coming after the mutants for revenge. Happy was an unsubtle person, and he lacked even the most basic understanding of anything beyond the coarsest emotions. If he had known the real reasons for the deaths, there would have been no comprehension behind those doll-like eyes of his. Happy Bruce's

spitting and snarling reached a crescendo and that was when he died, just at the instant calculated to create the biggest reaction in his audience. Fragments of his skin and bone went everywhere, coating the Fat Guy in hot blood and brain matter. The gang tore the air with gunfire and shouts, firing as they ran from the ruined mall. Like ants from a smoke-filled nest, the Mutancheros poured out into the weak daylight and mounted their vehicles, fleeing something so invisible that it could walk right past them and into the very heart of their secret camp.

In a roar of combustion-fuelled engines they fled, leaving Happy's decapitated corpse to cool and decay among the shrink-wrapped bodies of dead shoppers.

Inside the operations room, the air was dry and thin, the moisture drawn from it by the faint ozone scent of the computers and monitoring systems that crowded the rectangular compartment. There was little direct lighting aside from soft tactical lanterns and the cold glow of the console displays. A low, distant rumble formed the background to the chorus of whispered commands and mournful beeps as the technicians worked their panels; once in a while a flutter of far away sound would accompany a slight twitch in the decking.

The senior scientist glanced up and blinked at the brief sliver of light from the corridor outside, the security hatch opening and closing like an iris. He tried to keep a thinning of his lips as the new arrival approached him.

"Status?" asked the mission commander, sipping on a synthicaff.

The scientist indicated the master situation display with a jerk of his head. "Nominal. The fifth target has just been prosecuted."

The commander accepted this with a wary nod. "Dead?"

"Of course," the scientist retorted, a note of arrogance entering his tone. "As the mission briefing demanded, no survivors."

"Good." The other man leaned forward, his free hand reaching up to scratch absently at the white growth of beard across his chin. "They've moved on to vehicles now? Will it be able to keep pace with them over a sustained period?"

"If you want it to."

He considered the reply for a moment. "Yes," he said, "just let the unit proceed as it feels best. After all, if we keep micro-managing it, then we defeat the whole object of this exercise in

the first place.” When the scientist didn’t reply, the mission commander turned his full attention on him. Reflected sheets of data codes and tactical plots painted his angular face with colour. “Doctor?” he prompted.

The words spilled out of the scientist’s mouth with sudden intensity. “Once more, I feel myself obligated to question the intentions behind this field test! I have stated on several occasions that the project is not at a stage where it can accurately be supervised in an uncontrolled environment-”

“In your opinion,” broke in the other man. “Many of your colleagues do not agree. They find your estimates to be overly conservative.”

“This is not some crude firearm or explosive device!” he snapped back. “We are developing a weapons system of unparalleled sophistication and capacity. We cannot afford to make mistakes.” He blew out a breath. “Frankly, I have my doubts about the continuing value of this endeavour as a whole.”

The commander’s jaw stiffened. “While I respect your knowledge, doctor, perhaps I might draw your attention to the length of the this project’s development cycle to date? This unit’s inception began in the ashes of a war that almost destroyed us as a people, and now, a decade later, we are still without a workable weapon!”

“A workable weapon,” repeated the scientist, seizing on the words, “not an unpredictable hazard! This project should be shut down, pending a total re-evaluation.”

“Please, doctor. Don’t be so excitable! The device is functioning perfectly.”

“Is it?” The other man brought up a series of data panels and tapped his screen with a stubby finger. “Twice since the commencement of this test scenario I have logged neural response spikes outside the standard parameters. And before... before the activation I noticed some unusual behaviour patterns.”

“Explain.”

The scientist blinked, eyes focussing on a distant point. “I... find it difficult to put it into words, but I got the impression the unit was... that it was hiding something.”

The commander frowned, crushing the now-empty caff cap in his hand. “You spend too much time cooped up in the test labs, doctor. It’s affecting your perceptions,” he sneered. “You should be glad I gave you the opportunity for this little outing.”

The other man opened his mouth to speak, but a duty technician interrupted. "Sir? Targets and unit are entering the periphery of the Denver Death Zone. Ambient radiation levels are increasing and we're having problems with the telemetry links."

The bearded man glanced up at the main screen; the multiple camera-eye views were becoming foggy with interference and static. He threw the technician a nod. "We can't afford to lose any data. Instruct the pilot to descend to a lower altitude where the signal is stronger."

The order was relayed and the deck shifted slightly beneath their feet, the frame of the big transport VTOL biting into the heavier Colorado winds. Ignoring the sour expression on the face of the scientist, the mission commander watched with interest as the test unit's primary optics broadcast the wavering image of a patched ground rover, skidding across hard-packed earthen craters.

Minx had been the last person to speak to Derek the Teeth before he died; as she was gunning the engine of the DuneRail, he skipped up on to the back runner and said something about oranges. It was hard to tell. Derek's mouth had so many teeth, in such odd profusions and shapes that his speech was mostly clatterings of blunt enamel and jets of spit. Minx twitched her whiskers and gave him the same nod of fake understanding she always did - but then there was a flash at the edge of her vision and, like all the others, Derek's skull went pop. One razor-sharp canine cut a gouge over her steel shoulder pad as it came away with the rest of his head. Reflexively, Minx slammed her foot on the accelerator and the DuneRail chugged away, his headless body flapping behind for a mile or so when his bootstrap caught around the axle. By the time he fell off they were on the glassy stone of the DDZ highway, and Minx's attention was firmly fixed on keeping up with the rest of the pack. She kept her eyes wide open all the time, not wanting to blink even for the briefest instant. Minx didn't see things like most muties or norms did; her supposed "gift" from the cocktail of Strontium 90 isotopes that had mutated her genome, were peepers that worked on frequencies way beyond those visible to typical human eyes. Minx could see in the dark by reading the wave of heat bloom from the ground and the air, and the sight of Derek's body going from warm orange-red to featureless blue made her feel sick. Oh sure, she'd seen it happen before, more times than she could

remember; but Derek had been kind to her, and Minx didn't have any other friends among the Mutancheros.

She pressed her weight into the vehicle's steering yoke as the fleeing convoy bounced over the abandoned freeway interchange towards the gaping maw that had been Denver. The DuneRail felt wrong, sluggish; the rear wheels skidded and refused to hold fast. Reluctantly, Minx glanced over her shoulder, half-expecting to see a piece of the hapless Derek clogging the gears.

In the dark void between the twin trans-axles, there was a faint yellow shimmer that could have almost been the shape of a man. Minx blinked and felt the fur along her spine go taut.

It knew she saw it. The mutant girl stamped her foot on the brake and the DuneRail fishtailed wildly, yawing across the road and bumping into two other vehicles. The yellow shape flickered and flowed up over the back of the rover - and then vanished.

"Remarkable," commented the commander. "Did you see that? It modulated the temperature of the outer skin sheath to nullify the mutant's advantage."

The scientist shook his head. "That wasn't part of the program."

"Adaptation, improvisation. That is exactly what we want from the project."

On the screen, the cat-faced girl was gone, and the viewpoint quivered as the killer leapt from one moving vehicle to another.

It was past her in a black rush of noise, then Spooky's trike was upended with the impact of its landing. The thin, wispy bandit spun around with his neck bent in odd places, riding his makeshift cycle off the elevated road and into the abyss below. Some of the other Mutancheros were trying to extricate themselves from the logjam Minx's skid had created, and they burst like sacks of wet meat as the murderous silhouette sliced through them. Minx was rooted to the spot, trying to capture the ephemeral ghost in her vision, but all she saw was a dark blur, ice blue on ice blue, fast as death.

Gunfire crackled past her as Happy Bruce's former enforcer Bottleneck opened up with the twin .50 calibre machine guns mounted on his weather-beaten pickup truck. A rain of hard-jacketed slugs chewed through the other vehicles, hitting anything but the target they were meant for.

At last, cowering under the DuneRail's fender, Minx got a good look at the killer as it leapt from cover, bouncing off a bent concrete stanchion to dash over her head. It had skin that shimmered like black oil and trailing forests of cilia extending out of every inch of its limbs. It looked as if it might once have been human, but the coat of shifting matter all over it seemed more alive than the flesh beneath it. It was iridescent, like insect wings, and so dark it seemed like a hole in the air. Minx's heart froze when she saw the weapon growing out of its hand; a yawning black void like the tunnel into hell.

"You see how quickly it evaluates and determines targets? The large one represents the greater threat to it now."

"Then why did it not terminate him first, doctor?"

"I think... I think it's enjoying itself."

In mid-air the killer's gun spat death at Bottleneck and his crew, a storm of sun-hot plasmatic darts ripping apart the pickup. One instant the vehicle was rolling forward, guns chattering; the next it was a fireball filled with shrieking men and bullets. Minx was thrown to the tarmac by a wall of octane-tainted heat, her vestigial whiskers coiling back along her protruding snout. Time blurred around her for a moment and, when she tried to stand, a hard and inflexible hand clamped around her throat like an iron collar. Through blurry streams of colour she made out the smooth, featureless oval of the assassin's face. She tried to speak, but the muscles in her neck could not move air through her vocal cords.

Minx saw the gun again, and then the white of a killing heat.

The VTOL's engines threw dust and dead bodies aside in a ring of compacted air, extending spindly legs to settle on the Denver highway. On the monitor, the flyer seemed fat and docile under the targeting displays that ran through the mind of the killer.

"Deploy recovery team," ordered the commander. "I want the unit on ice and in standby mode until we complete debrief-"

On the screen, one of the commander's men nodded in a strange, spastic jerk, before bursting into flames. Except for one single display, all the tactical relays went dark; the remaining screen showed the other men ripped open and dying in strobe-speed murders, the VTOL looming larger as the killer loped toward it.