

Modall - J W Hicks

The Crash War - the beginning or the end?

A world-wide eruption, the culmination of a series of events, that happening singly could have been dealt with, but coming together set the world awry.

A failure of the fiscal system and a pandemic new-strain influenza, add to that the festering discontent of a disappointed electorate, stir in the fundamentalists' decision to take a stand against scientific manipulation of the genome, and the lava of anarchy erupts.

Some long time later Katherine Mary Modall, a brain-enhanced, telepathic Altered, is born.

Chapter One

Modall walked Market Street dodging haggling elders, faded mothers and grizzling kids, her pocket weighed down with a sleeping ferret. At least she hoped Hob was asleep or at the very least keeping his curiosity in check. One look at his odd-shaped head would inform the dullest Norm that he was Altered. And what would that say about her? Hell, the knives would be out before you could say telepathic mutant!

A teen mob ran from a corner store chased by a slug-fat guard. She watched the teens brandish heisted goods in the shop-guard's face. The guard stopped, faking breathlessness, letting them run free. Modall didn't blame him, knowing too much of winding lanes and ambushes.

'Hey, Modall, look around. You're the only fool interested.'

It was Hob, damn him. Too fucking nose-y, that ferret. He'd sworn to stay hidden. *'Sure, Mo,'* he'd said, *'Promise I'll stay in my pocket, I need the rest.'*

She looked around and fuck it, she was the only gawper.

'Thought the idea was to blend in?' Hob sent.

'Thought you promised to stay curled in your pocket?' she snapped back. *'You exhibiting that ferret face again?'*

'Sneaked a peek, thass all.'

'Oh, shut it, fuzz face.'

He shut down, stopped sending and Modall sighed, faking interest in a pile of rusty cans glimpsed through a gap in the fly-postered store

front. Instead of the cans, she studied the reflected image of Katherine Mary Modall. An androgynous face, gaunt and pain-lined, the sunken eyes faded from sapphire to a deader shade of blue, and buzz cut hair grown ferocious-wild. The oversized greatcoat helped mask her sex and the grunge look blended her with the rest of the Sinkport citizens. But Jeez, she looked used up. Twenty? Hell, she'd pass for double that, easy. Fingering her dull-blond hair she plucked a silver strand and frowned.

Hob's chirrup spurred her into motion and easing a hand inside her greatcoat, she located the poacher's pocket and smoothed the ferret in mute apology.

According to the street tag the teens had 'scaped down Screw Packet Lane. An arrow bolted to the wall pointed to the docks.

'We want the docks, Hob.'

'But we're after Steeple Lane, yeah?'

'That's what's on Spider's map.'

'Course he was drunk when he drew it,' Hob ventured.

'He's always drunk; doesn't slow him any. He swore he'd sailed from Sinkport mucho times; knew it like the back of his hand.'

Modall picked a scab on the ferret's paw. Hob nudged her away.

'You studied the state of his hands?' he carped. *'Coal hauler is he?'*

'Don't be pissy; Spider's sound. Okay, so he's a soak, but he doesn't drug with spin, his brain's not rusted up, like some.' She paused a moment to stem a black thought, before going on. *'He swore on his mother's life the map was true.'*

'Spider's got a mother?'

Modall ignored the ferret and walked to another turn off. That Steeple Lane? Nah, right direction, wrong fucking name. Keep to the map, Modall. Trudge on.

The further she walked the more decrepit things got. Fly-papered stores giving way to wire frontages and boarded doors. A burned out block divided hope from despair, and thereafter she walked in druggy spin fumes and sewer stink.

Shoppers morphed into loiterers kicking cans, eyeing rats and youngsters with the same rapacious stare. Scrap-clothed figures hustled trays of doubtful meat and scabby veg to gaunt adults and silent babes. She pulled up her scarf and practised mouth breathing.

'And they say ferrets smell!'

Modall nodded; her thoughts in sync with Hob's.

'Retrace our steps?' he suggested.

'Hold on. There's something up ahead, another wall tag.'

Tag said Steeple Lane. Great, the narrowest, filthiest alley in the whole narrow filthy town and it was the one she wanted.

She had scammed a ride to Sinkport on a trade-barge, promising the bargewife to rid her stored grain of nibblers. When she and Hob were done, the bargewife counted the heap of carcasses and beamed.

‘Here,’ she said, handing Modall a brass token. ‘Prime job, sonny. Take this as an extra.’

A barge token, a brass roundel stamped one side with the barge number, and on the other side, the owner’s name, Merlee Connell. First token Modall had touched. Seen a few passed hand to hand, knew their value. Currency such bargee tokens, trust-coins, an *in* with the clannish waterfarers. Damn fine bonus.

Now, as she scanned the Steeple Street tag in the fading daylight, the storm clouds loosed their load.

‘Shit!’

‘Trouble?’

‘Bloody April shower. Keep your head down, no use both of us getting soaked.’

Hunched into the collar of her stained great-coat she started down the steep wynd; Spider’s slurred words playing in her brain. ‘Steer clear of that place, Modall. Stinking town. Croncs and kid clans, thass all. No one left but sickers waiting for the death cart. And steer clear of Ambrose, while you’re at it. He uses people. Fucking *user*, that’s all he is. Don’t trust the oily bastard.’

Easy to say, but who else was there? ‘Sides, she owed Ambrose too much to say no.

Between skidding on filth layers and navigating crumbling fissures in the angled lane, she eyed the crowding tenements for springers, stabbers and other interested parties.

‘Hob?’ she said aloud. ‘Rain’s easing, want to do some shoulder sitting?’

‘S’matter? Got the geebies?’

Modall didn’t answer, but breathing came easier with the ferret draped under her scarf, his nose pressed against her neck. And wouldn’t you know it, number 115 was right down at the arse end overlooking the wharf.

She opened her mouth, closing it when Hob jabbed her with a claw. ‘*Voice off, Mo. Never know who’s listening.*’

She shook her head. ‘*Right. Yeah. Should have thought. God, I’m losing it.*’

‘Should have told Ambrose to go piss against some other tree. You ain’t over that burning, and the...’ The voice broke off, then charged on. ‘*Sides the cut’s still scabby and how long’s it been since you slept more than an hour straight? Still dreaming of...?’* Another pause.

Modall stiffened, then shrugged. *'I owe him.'* Ambrose was the one she ran to when the wound festered and she too fevered to think straight. She knocked, he let her in.

'You worked off what you owed, weeks past. Face it, Mo he's playing you.'

'We're safe with him. Don't have no truck with murdering Zealots, does Ambrose.'

'Fine. He's a glowing saviour. Now, which floor?'

'Top.'

'Figures.'

The tenement door hung crooked - lock drilled, hinge busted and knife scratched, no different from most others she'd passed. Sidling into the dim hallway she smelled cabbage farts and pee. She eyed a line of wire-tied doors before cat footing up the concrete stairway. The dying everglows stuck to the wall gave out a sullen glimmer and she couldn't avoid the grunge that collected on her boot soles. It slowed the upward climb.

'Eyes peeled, Hob.'

Reaching first landing she got out the knife and scraped her boot soles, listening to the wailers and coughers behind closed doors. She scoped for eyes; no watchers. Hob agreed, so she trod on, knife in hand.

'Onwards and upwards,' she sent, then cleared her throat. *'Jeez, Hob, the smell's enough to corpse a rat. Got to be an army of cats squatting here.'*

She climbed flight after flight, watched by the occasional shrinking ghost from behind a fist-holed door. She stepped over shit piles and puke spills; kneed a spin-head mumbler working at his flaccid cock and eventually arrived at door six five. It was open.

'Want me to suss it out?'

'Yeah.'

The sable wisp of hob ferret poured down her jacket, stepped fastidiously across the gluey boards and whisked through Lucas' door. Modall breathed lightly, waiting for the call.

'Mo?' His tone was bleak.

'Shit, he's not...?'

'Oh yeah. Still warm, though.'

Slipping inside she scoped the room. Single bunk, neatly made and smelling clean, a chest of drawers, one scrubbed table and a three legged stool. On one side of the narrow window stood a battered stove, on the other a one-tap sink. That was it, discounting the corpse on the blood soaked rag rug and the polished mirror hanging by the door. She checked out the mirror, met her own dark eyes in the pristine glass, sickened by their coldness. She'd overdosed on killings, and it fucking showed.

Lucas' throat was slashed wide and jagged. *'Say, Hob, what they cut him with, a saw? Shoddy work - not pro. Check him while I hunt the bead.'*

While the ferret sniffed and frisked the corpse, Modall unscrewed the sink tap and pressed her finger in the gunk, *'Got it.'* She held up what could have been a grain of rice or possibly a mouse turd, but was in fact the micro-bead she'd been sent for.

'Slasher missed it?' Hob offered.

Modall ran tap water on the bead then placed it in her smugglers' mouth pouch, the one Ambrose had Sammy J insert. *'You get anything, Hob?'*

'Lucas smells of blood and spin.'

'Betting that's the slasher. Lucas didn't use. Ambrose tosses spinners.'

The ferret reared up, his long body stiffening.

'What?' she asked. *'Hear something?'*

'Yeah.'

'Jeez I am slipping. You're right, shouldn't have taken the job. I'm too blitzing weak to think straight. The freaking room's not tossed. Slasher heard us coming. Could be he's still around. Best take no chances.'

Hob jumped to Modall's shoulder. *'So?'*

'So now it's up and out. We got the bead.'

'Up? You mean the roof? How d'you know there'll be a way out?'

'Lucas was old school; never missed a trick. Always had an exit planned. Bet you every hinge'll be greased and every roof tile safe to walk on. Ambrose called him Mr Locks and Plans.'

'So how come he got slashed so easy?'

'Off day? Shit, we all get off days.'

They listened at the door. Nothing. Maybe Hob heard a hunting feline? Still...

She ghosted to the far end of the landing where every glow was grunged dark. She pointed to the ceiling hatch. *'Lucas must have covered the glows to keep the escape route out of sight.'*

Hunkering by the skirting board, Modall picked up a hook-ended bamboo pole.

'But here's the key!' In seconds she had the ceiling hatch flapping open and a flexi-ladder hooked down. *'Pocket, Hob,'* she said, abandoning the pole and was half way up the swaying ladder before the ferret sent a query. *'How come the pole was so easy to find? Thought the guy was a pro.'*

'Quit carping, we're home and dry.'

