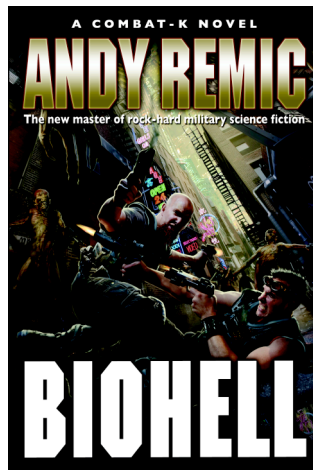




BIOHELL

By Andy Remic

The City: an entire planet teeming with corruption, guns, sex, and designer drugs. A place where humans are upgraded by the injection of microscopic nanobots, courtesy of new technology from the Nano-Tek corporation. But when this highly desirable technology heads onto the black market, millions of people inject themselves with pirated biomods. They become deformed and transform into zombies. Now they roam the streets, out for blood and packed with shotguns and bombs. The Combat-K squad are dropped into this warzone to uncover what's turned this planet into a wasteland of murder and mutations. And soon their focus is on the darkness at the Nano-Tek corporation itself... This is hard-hitting science fiction from the author of *War Machine*.



About the Author

Andy Remic is a young British writer and teacher from Greater Manchester. During his teaching career he developed

an interest in martial arts and is now expert in unarmed combat. He can kill a man with a single blow, but prefers writing and hacking computer systems. BioHell is his fifth novel..

•ALSO FROM SOLARIS•

WAR MACHINE

•COMING SOON FROM SOLARIS•

HARDCORE

The following is an excerpt from *Biohell* by Andy Remic.

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Keenan sat his KTM crosser atop the volcanic cliff and gazed over fifty square clicks of disused quarry. Black rock aggression spread like an unravelled web filled with thousands of tunnels, dips, banks, drops and jumps. It would have been an adrenalin-junkie's playground—if it hadn't been so damned dangerous.

Keenan revved the bike hard, 1250cc LC12 titanium lekradite single-cylinder engine growling harsh, like a caged SPAW before its alloy breakfast. Sunlight glimmered on Keenan's piss-pot lid with raised black visor, and he lit a home-rolled cigarette and breathed deep on Widow Maker tobacco. The tip glowed. Smoke trailed from his nostrils. Keenan smiled, as he relaxed into the moment.

Reaching inside battered old leathers, he pulled free a flask and drank. Brown droplets of Galhari Jatata spirit glistened on his lips like a henna tattoo. His brain descended into honey, and he welcomed too readily the disturbing familiarity of an alcohol kick...

A distant drone cut through maudlin reminiscing and dragged Keenan kicking to the present. Three bikes slammed across flat, hard-packed earth at speed, sand pluming a wake of confetti streamers. He watched, cool and detached, from his high vantage point on the

perimeter lip of the quarry. Dismissing the joyriders, he tapped down his visor and dropped the bike off the ledge in a sudden lunge... the engine screamed, and suspension juddered under clamped fists. Adrenalin rushed Keenan, wind smashing him, laughter filling his helmet. He crouched tight and fell down the vertical wall with tyres thudding and suspension pounding to level out some two hundred feet below in a valley of scattered volcanic cubes, heart in his mouth, balls in his pelvis. Keenan cruised the flat moonscape, regaining his heartbeat, then picked up his speed in sudden aggressive acceleration, leaning forward over the tank as the bike howled and climbed, low pressure tyres digging into rock and shale and propelling him up the incline. The bike leapt above the ridge, taking air, then hunkered down on suspension as Keenan's boot tapped down in a neat halt. He took the cigarette from his mouth, and with lazy contempt flicked free a narrow column of ash.

But...

They wouldn't leave him. Despite nicotine, adrenalin, alcohol, trikalla surges, and, sometimes, when the nightmares got too bad, something stronger... the images would not disperse. They followed, doggedly, nagging old ghosts prickling his spine with memory and making him shiver to his bloody, battered core. Words scrolled, ancient, staccato, stuttering, an old black and white movie filled with white noise and a billion-mile fragmented signal from a desolate world...

A world of betrayal, a world of hate, a world of the dead...

It can't be true.

I'm sorry, Keenan.

Why, Pippa? In the name of God, why?

You betrayed me.

I betrayed you? That's a fucking reason to kill my wife, my Rachel, my little sweet Ally? You fucking whore.

You fucking disease. How could you do it to them? How could you murder my babes?

Keenan shook his head. Tears wet his cheeks. He rubbed them savagely, as if they were the enemy. He took out his flask. Sank another drink. "You bitch. I hope you rot in hell."

He heard the roar of engines, clearer now, brittle sounds cracking the stillness. He glanced back to the ridge he'd occupied only a few short seconds ago. Three bikes sat sky-lined. Matt black, with riders clad in black. The machines gleamed like cruel insects. And... something, some primal instinct slammed Keenan through his drug buzz and he screwed the KTM's throttle wide open as machine-gun fire roared across space and bullets whizzed and whistled around him. His bike leapt, front wheel clawing the air, engine spitting hot slivers of shaved cylinder fire which erupted from scorched exhaust cans. Keenan shot across the plateau with bullets flickering around him. Sparks spat from the bike, kicked spurts of dust and rock... but one—one found its mark, skimming through bike armour on its wormhole trajectory and carving a line across Keenan's flank, opening him like a sardine tin, like a zip. Keenan grunted in shock, felt a flush of warm blood. The impact twisted him, a sledgehammer blow. He hunkered forward, low over the tank, as the bike teetered across Devil's Brow,

then skidded, slithered, and dropped off the violent, broken-tooth edge...

Keenan rode the KTM in a state of descending, cool fury. There was no pain and he gave a grim smile inside his helmet. That wasn't necessarily a good thing. The KTM roared and bounced inelegantly to the rocky floor, and stalled with a cough, rolling a few feet in silence. Tyres crunched loose gravel. Keenan grimaced, mind cold and analytical, breathing deeply, corroborating internal diagnostics—and the problem he faced. Three bikes. Machine guns. One probability. Assassins...

Sent for him? Specifically, for him?

For a long, long moment he sat there. You could let them take you. Finish the job. It wouldn't be so bad. Wouldn't hurt. Go on, end the pain, sever the suffering, twist a lid on that jar of bubbling torment. What's the point going on, compadre? They're dead. Your girls are dead and gone and buried and dust... murdered meat, mate, and you couldn't even kill the bitch who slaughtered them in their beds, could you? Couldn't even finish that simple—final—job. You coward. You liver. You maggot.

No, growled Keenan, teeth grinding.

Why ever not?

Keenan heard the bikes' screaming approach and their sudden drop off Devil's Brow close behind in a shower of raging thunder, suspension pounding, juddering, as they slammed down the slope. Through waves of surging adrenaline tinged with pain, Keenan loosened the strap on his helmet.

Why not? he thought, mind a savage tornado.

Because I'm still alive, fucker, that's why not...

The bikes howled at him. In one movement Keenan tugged free his helmet and whirled, the lid smashing the face of the closest rider as the group swept past. The figure was knocked back, bike veering right to smack a fist of rock. His body propelled like a stone from a slingshot, bike smashing end over end against the rocky ground; rider, with flailing slapping machine gun, tumbling to land heavily on his back, stunned into a coma. Keenan hit the starter, dumped the clutch and his KTM shot at the man, front wheel lifting. The man's hands rose in submission as Keenan's rear wheel connected, caving in the assassin's chest and leaving a long streak of crimson flesh vivid on black rock. Keenan slithered to a stop. Glanced left. The two riders had halted, surprised by this sudden turn. As if through honey, they lifted guns and Keenan spun his bike on a slippery platter of geysered blood and—screamed at them. Bullets howled like needles, then he was past in a roar and through them and thundering down the valley floor, swaying left, then banking right to avoid priapic knives of rock. He hit a jump, soared over a deep crevasse known locally as Widow's Hook, landed light on the KTM's back wheel, and banked along a sloping wall with engine thumping rhythmically. He risked a glance back. The attackers were following. He watched them jump, land, and Keenan lowered his head and opened the throttle. The titanium lekradite breathed deep, breathed strong, exhaust note roaring with a metal purity of rawness and engineered savagery. Ahead, Keenan focused on the old mine tunnels, complete with timber

barricade and huge signs displaying skull and crossbones alongside Quad-Gal symbols for heavy tox pollution. Keenan roared at the barrier, feeling a fresh pulse of blood wash down his flank as he shifted uncomfortably in the saddle. He flicked the clutch, kicked the front wheel into the air and smashed through shards of wood—and on, into solid black.

Lights swept on, and the bike's roaring reverberated, deafening him. Keenan didn't slow, despite the insanity.

The tunnel was narrow, winding, littered with rock.

But... Keenan had been there, once before... years earlier. A self-confessed adrenalin junkie, he found the alluring danger of forbidden places hard to ignore.

Now memories flitted like teasing butterflies. The KTM slammed through darkness, Keenan's head low over the buzzing tank to avoid unforgiving overhangs. Sparks showered as he caught a foot-peg on rock, jerking the bike.

Where is it? he thought. Alcohol tortured his senses.

Mocked him. Jeered him.

Where is it?

Keenan feathered the brakes. The powerful headlight picked out the cone of a side-tunnel, and Keenan squeezed the front brake hard, went up on his front wheel and kicked the back of the bike wide around into the opening. He shuffled backwards, killing lights and engine. Stepping off the bike, he dropped to one knee and lifted a skull-sized rock. He could hear the pursuing bikes thundering close—fast. Keenan's eyes narrowed. Gone were pain and alcohol and bad memories; and fear.

Here, now, everything converged on this moment of destruction.

Lights danced a strobe.

One bike flickered past, howling.

The second approached, and Keenan hurled the rock with devastating effect. The bike jiggled, was slammed sideways, and rider and machine spun in a terrifying embrace of sparks and roars and high-pitched banging squeals. Flesh and moving machinery merged. Blood sprayed in thick streamers. Skin became spaghetti. Man and machine became one, spun in a wild dancing flurry of churning ripping chain and rock splinters and torn alloy. Fuel pissed over man and rider... as ignition clicked causing a bloom of fire to engulf this sudden thrashing unwilling cyborg. The explosion boomed. The assassin and his flaming steed were consumed, engulfed, exploding in a shower of fire and red-hot shrapnel, to come finally, slowly, to rest further down the tunnel in a groaning lump of molten metal and flesh and flame.

The lead assassin slowed his bike, glancing back as his comrade disintegrated. Then his head snapped forward to witness walls disappear... and he was soaring over a high curved bridge only two feet wide, a slick cambered arc of smooth polished rock which fell away to either side, dropping into a deep and terrifying chasm. The killer slowed his bike, wary, then stopped, boot touching down, machine gun coming up and around as he looked ahead, then back, to the inferno raging in the tunnel mouth.

Keenan burst from the wall of fire, head low, KTM roaring. The killer drilled a short burst of bullets and

realised Keenan's sudden, aggressive intention; he opened his own bike, shot off across the massive arcing bridge as Keenan's front tyre came within inches of the assassin's bike.

Together they howled across the chasm, symbiotes, bikes wailing, caressing, animal roars booming from high rock walls. The narrow bridge twisted, turned, rose and fell like an incredible roller-coaster. Tyres squealed and squirmed inches from a long dark fall into merciless oblivion.

Keenan, face grim, pushed his bike to the limit... then suddenly backed off, brakes on hard, leaving trails of juddering rubber as he hunkered down and back to give the bike more traction, more stopping power. The KTM slithered, and the assassin recognised, too late, the crumbling gap in the bridge. He hit brakes out of reflex, machine shuddering as it went into a spark-showering low-side... where it sailed silently off the edge, and down into the gaping maw.

Immediately, the bike vanished.

Dragged down by the bony fingers of the abyss.

The assassin slid along the bridge, leathers hissing, hands and boots struggling for grip. He hit the lip, where fingers snagged crumbled edges and he flipped, legs kicking over, to slam against the vertical rock wall. He hung there, breathing harsh, then panicked for his gun as Keenan edged forward.

The killer's gun was gone.

Keenan made a tutting sound, then seated himself cross-legged at the edge of the precipice. He smiled reassuringly at the assassin, and drew a long sleek blade

from his boot. He toyed with it for a few moments, then tapped the blade close to the assassin's fingers.

"Who sent you?"

No answer.

"I'll ask you one more time. Then my patience dies.

When that happens, I'll start removing your fingers.

Who sent you?"

Laughter erupted, and Keenan was shocked to realise the creature before him wasn't human. Scowling, he reached out and tugged free the killer's helmet—to stare into narrowed, blood-red eyes in an oval face of... what appeared to be diseased, pitted metal, like old corroded iron. But this was no machine, it was a—

Shit, thought Keenan. It's a junk.

The corroded alloy nose was a small nub, and the lipless mouth opened like flowing liquid metal to reveal a dull silver interior and row upon row of tiny, triangular teeth. A forked tongue flickered against black, pus-oozing gums, and Keenan had to fight a primeval instinct not to take a hurried scramble back. This junk was a mutation of a once proud alien species; intelligent, noble, creative, the self-professed builders of a new utopia. Now junks were a degenerative pestilence from the diseased badlands and toxic wastes of the lethal ex-colony world of Twisted Eden. Or they had been, before their extermination.

Junks were terminally diseased, a living breathing biohazard with devolved brains and a dedication to nothing more than death. Across the Quad-Gal they were classified as vermin, a scourge, to be exterminated on

sight lest they poison every living, breathing creature that walked and talked.

Now, however they were extinct.

Or so everybody thought...

The junk laughed, a hollow crackling sound. Its blood-red eyes sparkled.

“You want to know who sent me?” The voice was high-pitched, and hurt Keenan’s ears like razors on glass.

Keenan sat, shocked. Junks brought nothing but plague and death and desolation. They had devolved intelligence devoted to murder. They were a toxic embarrassment, and only a madman would employ them... for they were a plague, a pandemic, a virus... and to introduce them to a planet like Galhari was sheer bloody insanity. The junks were so utterly contaminated that, thousands of years earlier, they had been known to wipe out entire colony worlds by the simple act of breathing.

“Yes.” Keenan was trying hard not to inhale. He studied the pitted, acid-etched face. There were no emotions.

Nothing he could understand. It wore a blank mask.

“You will find out, my friend. Soon enough.” The twisted alien met Keenan’s gaze... as it released its grip, kicked itself back, and vanished into the dark...

Wearily, Keenan climbed to his feet and moved from the spot. He took a long soothe from his Jataxa flask, and with head down, thoughts tumbling, and the pain from the bullet score beginning to nag at him with grinding pulses, he headed back to the quarry.

Keenan crouched before the dead, chest-caved junk, studying the creature. Distantly, he could hear the drone of a chopper and the noise grated his senses like a garrotte. With his knife, he reached out and prised open the junk's crushed flesh. He gazed into the excised cavity with its broken, three-prong ribs and strange, brightly coloured internal organs which glittered like molten jewels. I wonder if the history books were right? With a swift cut he levered out the junk's miniaturised grey heart on the end of his knife, grasped it, and it squirmed, almost crawling, to nestle in his hand like a slimy, cold eel. He sliced the sausage-like heart down its fibrous centre, and squeezed free a small black coin. "Shit. So it is real."

Keenan lifted the coin, staring at the smooth gloss disk. This was the junk's SinScript. It contained an encrypted list of the semi-sentient alien's instructions. Where it came from. Its destination and priorities. A program, of sorts. A puzzle for the brave and the foolish. Legend had it the SinScript contained not just the junk's life, but a ghost-scrrawl of its future. What it would do. What it might achieve. A forecast. A damn prophecy.

Swiftly, Keenan sat back on his heels and used his Combat K PAD to ignite the corpse. As smoke rolled to the sky he moved away, crouching, and watched passively as the junk burned. Black fumes billowed, and there, amidst the barren quarry-scape of Galhari, amongst chunks of jagged stone, house-sized boulders, towering cliffs of diagonal sparkling lodes, this whole thing, this attack, these creatures, it just seemed wrong. Keenan shook his head. Junks. Filthy, toxic junks. What

the hell were they doing on Galhari? What did they want?

Keenan shivered... his eyes lifting to the horizon where he could just distinguish a thick column of smoke. Something clicked in his soul and a coldness crept over him like ants. Keenan stood. Glanced down at his boots. He could see tiny stones vibrating, and suddenly the whole world seemed to tremble as a vast noise approached, a massive, mammoth booming which swept across the sky and Keenan looked up, back, as ten, twenty, fifty military K Freighters filled the sky with their offensive elongated bulks, cruising overhead and blocking the sky, filling Keenan with horror.

“No.”

Keenan ran to his bike, fired the engine and screamed off across loose stone. The three junks he'd killed hadn't been assassins. They were a scouting party. This was an...

Keenan's grimace was darker than a junk's soul. This was an invasion.

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