

WARHAMMER
40,000



— THE —
**STRONG
AMONG US**



A DEATH KORPS OF KRIEG SHORT STORY

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THE STRONG AMONG US

by Steve Lyons

The forge had been besieged for seventeen days.

It felt like longer. Jarrah struggled to remember how life had been before, when he had felt protected. He was becoming accustomed to fear's icy grip on his heart, and this frightened him more.

Hard labour was a welcome distraction. Today, he manned a defensive emplacement. A half-constructed Earthshaker cannon had been wheeled up to a huge crack in the wall. Jarrah didn't know how to operate it - though he had played a small part in its manufacture - but he could heft heavy shells up onto his shoulder and pass them to a fellow drudge, who would load them.

The big gun's blast had made him wince, at first. Now his ears were deadened to it, as they were to the rolling thunder of guns from without.

Jarrah hadn't looked outside in days. He feared what he might see, though he knew he would likely see nothing. The forge's attackers were distant yet, hunkered down in their trenches and dugouts. Jarrah had glimpsed them only once, shortly after their arrival, specks on the horizon or possibly tricks of the eye. Now a smoke haze clung to the blasted land between them, obscuring them further.

He knew the attackers were still there by their thunder. In his bones, he felt the impacts of their better-targeted shells.

He may have helped assemble their cannons as well. Blackfire Forge had shipped so many Earthshakers to the Emperor's fighting forces. It was one such force that now pounded at its obdurate walls.

Every morning, every night, Jarrah prayed for them to break through.

He prayed for the Emperor to save him.

Jarrah slept in fits and starts.

The most comfortable places - the few living spaces and larger clerical offices - were taken by Blackfire's occupiers. He bedded down draped in a scavenged sheet against the cold, iron side of a broken-down press. He hadn't bathed in weeks.

The forge was the size of a hundred city blocks. This deep inside, the only light was actinic, unnatural. Jarrah had no way to measure time, but for the klaxons that still blew to mark the changing of work shifts. He rose not when he had slept enough, but when his muscles ached too much to sleep on.

He took what food was provided to him. There had been plenty, but now rations seemed to shrink daily. Jarrah boiled up grey oats over a sputtering furnace, and joined a group of weary labourers to eat and converse in low voices.

'I tell you,' said an older, sallow-faced man - Jarrah didn't know his name, but thought he had worked in Grinding - 'they're Death Korps. That's who they've sent to take back Blackfire, a Krieg regiment.'

At least half his audience, including Jarrah, looked blank.

The man sighed. 'I saw them in a pict-feed. It must have been, I don't know, twenty years ago. Siege specialists, they are. No matter the target, they'll dig in and wait, for weeks or months if they have to. I heard of one siege that lasted over ten years.'

A gleam had entered the sallow-faced man's eye. He cleared his throat and looked away. A pair of cultists in

frayed black robes, their faces crazed with tattooed blasphemies, walked by but didn't spare the speaker a glance. He resumed his narrative, trying harder to maintain a neutral tone.

'I saw footage of them in action. They never once faltered. For each one that fell, another two, three, four rose to replace him, and they just kept on coming, advancing.'

Jarrah pictured a mass of Guardsmen in shining armour, breaking Blackfire's tattooed captors, trampling them underfoot. He felt a thrill of hope, but suppressed it. Like the speaker, he didn't dare let his loyalties show. No cultists were watching him now, but there were traitors among his fellow captives.

He had woken to the screaming of one such, two nights ago: 'Masters! Masters! These men are plotting to kill your sentries and open a gate to our foes.' Jarrah had shrunk beneath his flimsy sheet, plugging his ears and hating himself for being unable to do anything. He had tried to blot out the sounds of gunshots and tortured screams, as black robes had swooped upon the scene.

Three alleged plotters had been dragged away, bloodied, one body left to rot. The informant had snatched at a trailing robe, gibbering, 'Did I serve you well? Will I be rewarded?' Dislodged with a sharp kick, he had scampered into a corner to whimper.

When Jarrah had woken again, the informant was dead, his throat slit. This at least reassured him that not all his former workmates had turned. Most were keeping their heads down as he was, doing what they must to stay alive. He couldn't tell the faithful from the heretic, however, nor guess who might break next.

'I heard...' a young man with a tangle of blond hair ventured, 'I heard that Garran and the others were dead.'

The news was met by noncommittal murmurs, none of them surprised. 'I heard the same,' someone else spoke up, 'from Tharn in Waste Disposal. He said their bodies...' He

drew in a shuddering breath. 'He said they were covered in boils and sores, and *deformed*. Like their skin and bones had melted.'

A few men almost crossed their chests with the sign of the aquila, but checked themselves. Jarrah eyed the mound of tasteless oats on his spoon and lowered it again.

When the cultists had infiltrated and seized Blackfire Forge two months ago, they had killed its shift managers, administrators and security personnel. They had spared the labourers, those who didn't try to fight them. In the earliest days, they had been pressed back into service, forging and assembling weapons to employ against the soldiers whom the Emperor would undoubtedly send.

Most of the forges had ceased to function now. The cultists, blaming sabotage, had executed scores of suspects - or done worse with them, it was rumoured.

More likely, they were themselves to blame. They had no concept of how to run this facility, how to serve the machine-spirits that controlled its daily routines. They cared only for their earthly pleasures, and for whatever profane rituals they conducted behind chained doors. They worked their captives hard - but one cultist's order was often gainsaid by another, creating confusion. Small but crucial tasks had been neglected until the complex processes that relied upon them had broken down.

Jarrah's job, assembling minor components of the Earthshaker's targeting system, had vanished along with said components. He had not been reassigned, but was afraid to stand idle. He had no wish to be taken beyond those chained doors, to share the fate of the luckless Garran and friends.

'How much longer, do you think?' asked the young blond man. 'They've been out there so long, the soldiers, and don't seem to be getting any closer.'

'They will,' said the sallow-faced man with quiet certainty.

'You said they'll wait. They'll wait for months if they have

to.'

The older man nodded. 'The Death Korps of Krieg will break through these walls, we can be sure. It's just a matter of time. But if half of what we hear is true - about the cultists, about the powers they are trying to raise here - they may be too late.'

The diners lapsed into a sullen silence thereafter. Jarrah added his bowl to the piles of dirty crockery that it was no one's job to wash, and trudged back towards his post. He spotted a rattling, whining trolley headed his way and, hurrying to match speed with it, hopped onto its flatbed trailer.

The trolley snaked its way through the forge's gloomy, overheated tunnels, with passengers stepping on and off along the way. Some of them conversed, in the usual desultory tones, and Jarrah listened in, always eager for news, for hope.

He never spoke himself, however, just as he never met the glowering eyes of the cultists they passed along their route. It was safer that way.

Jarrah had not been assigned to the Earthshaker. Becoming superfluous several days ago, he had anxiously sought a useful role for himself. Finding two workers struggling to tame the massive cannon, he had offered his assistance.

He knew Tallen, the cannon's loader, already. His skin was bronzed, his muscles rippling from a lifetime of swinging heavy hammers. The wirier, thin-faced gunner he did not know, and they hadn't swapped names.

Compared to Tallen, Jarrah felt puny and clumsy. He had struggled to match the fitter man's pace, at first. By now, he had adapted to the unchanging routine of bending, lifting, turning, lowering - or Tallen had wearied and slowed.

Jarrah tried not to think about what he was doing. He prayed that none of his shells had taken a life. The soldiers surrounding the forge, he hoped, were safe in their

trenches. The bombardment was merely intended to keep them from emerging. He was only delaying their advance – which was troubling enough.

A braver man might have confided in the others. He might have suggested firing the cannon less often, perhaps only when they were observed. He might have proposed tampering with its sights to make its shells fall short. They could even have damaged the weapon beyond repair.

Tallen thrust a shell into the Earthshaker's breech and stepped back, wiping his brow with the back of his hand. 'Let's hope it blows some soldier's head off,' he grumbled. 'Why can't they just leave us alone? We didn't invite them here.'

Jarrah looked at the big man – properly, for the first time that day – and suddenly his failure to speak out felt like a blessing. Tallen's face was not smeared with soot as he had assumed, but with ink. It formed a smudgy but distinct shape on his cheek, spilling onto his neck: a shape that Jarrah had seen upon many a cultist's face.

It was a star, formed by a black circle with eight barbed spears jutting out of it.

'If they just went away, we would be fine,' Tallen resumed. 'We could live as the masters aim to do, a life of pleasure.'

'Outside of the Emperor's protection,' the Earthshaker's gunner rumbled, without turning from his charge.

'What has the Emperor done for us?' Tallen spat. 'I break my back for over twenty years, working ten-hour shifts for Him, and for what in return?'

He glared at Jarrah, who shifted awkwardly. He wasn't prepared for such a test. He shied from speaking blasphemies aloud. He forced a weak smile – supportive enough, he hoped – to his lips instead, but hated himself for it.

'You think the cult will allow us to join them?' the gunner asked, mildly.

'They said so, didn't they? They told us, anyone who turns

to their cause would be welcomed. They said we could be saved. We could be free.'

Jarraah heard a sudden sound, and whirled around. He expected to find a cultist standing behind him, perhaps with a knife drawn to punish him for disloyal thoughts. Instead, he only glimpsed a dark, hunched figure as it slipped away around the tunnel's curve. It was roughly humanoid in size and shape, and yet something about it made his spine tingle with dread.

The murmurs around the tables that evening concerned monsters.

They - or possibly it, no one could be sure - had been glimpsed throughout the forge, always cloaked in shadows. Descriptions varied hugely. The monster or monsters had eight limbs or just two. One slavering mouth full of sharp teeth, or smaller maws all over their misshapen bodies. The monsters had claws or tentacles or suckers - and tails, reportedly whip-thin, barbed or forked.

Observers agreed that pale, grey flesh tumbled in folds from the monsters' twisted skeletons, pitted with scars and livid with boils. There was much talk of the cultists' secret rituals, and general agreement that the monsters were linked to them.

'Summoned to protect the forge?' someone wondered.

'Or sent to punish us?' suggested another, in a quavering voice.

Jarraah had convinced himself that he had been imagining things. Now, the memory of the fleeting, indistinct shape in the tunnel left him feeling nauseous.

He heard no reports of the monsters attacking anyone. There was much talk, however, of labourers unseen for days. Some were soon confirmed alive and well; of others, there was only speculation. Jarraah wondered what might have been left of him, of Tallen and their gunner, had the monster chosen not to pass them by. Who would have

missed him, he asked himself, or even noticed him gone?

He knew things were serious when the cultists employed the public address system to insist that they weren't. He hadn't heard the crackles and hisses of the old vox-speakers in some time, and they startled him.

The cultist whose voice boomed out across the forge sounded drunk. He rambled at length about power and freedom, and cursed the Emperor repeatedly. *'We welcome the spawn creatures as they test our faith,'* he slurred, *'our resolve to cast off Imperial shackles. The strong among us need have no fear of mutations.'*

That wording bothered Jarrah. Did it mean, as was the muttered consensus around him, that the monsters would kill the cultists' enemies? He recalled the fate of Garran and his plotters, the lurid account of their disfigurements in death, and another – a far worse – possibility took root in his nightmares.

He took a long gulp from his glass, in part to cover the revulsion etched clearly on his face. Blackfire Forge straddled numerous underground rivers, so at least there was plenty of water, pumped up by the gallon as a natural coolant.

That night, Jarrah knelt beside the broken-down press, with his back to the grunts and snores of his fellows. He breathed on a glass panel over a dial and rubbed it with a grimy sleeve until he could see his reflection faintly by actinic light. He lifted a trembling finger, caked in wet soot.

He prayed to the Emperor, begging His understanding.

It wasn't that he had lost faith. But the Emperor's soldiers weren't here. They couldn't protect him. He had to protect himself until they came and, not being a fighter, he could think of only one way.

Jarrah put his fingertip to his cheek, letting the overgrown nail dig in. He gritted his teeth. He marked his face with the shaky image of an eight-pointed star.

On the twentieth day, the Death Korps broke into Blackfire Forge.

The first Jarrah knew of it was a panicky vox announcement: *'If you value your freedom, if you value your life, you must fight them.'*

His three-man crew exchanged glances, each seeing only indecision in the others' eyes.

'Do we keep firing?' asked Tallen helplessly.

They didn't know where the incursion had occurred: a long way from their emplacement, clearly. Through the crack in the wall, nothing had changed. They could see only smoke, hear only thunder. Jarrah had waited so long for this moment, and it didn't seem real.

'Don't let them beat us, not when we are so close. Keep them back. You must keep them away from us!'

There followed a series of distorted bangs and crashes. Then another voice - more confident and commanding - crackled over the speakers.

'All labourers, report to the south-west sector immediately. Stragglers will be punished.'

Jarrah's crewmates sprang into motion. He found himself running with them, though it was the last thing his legs wanted to do. He looked for an escape route, somewhere to hide until the fighting was over. But what if it didn't end, he asked himself? What if the attackers were repulsed? What if this was another test?

Then it was too late. More men streamed out of the tunnels around him, hemming Jarrah in between them. Blackfire had employed many tens of thousands of labourers. They outnumbered the occupiers by a considerable factor - but, like him, they had chosen not to fight but to survive. What else had they done all their lives, after all, but follow orders?

An engine whined, tyres squealed and suddenly there was a trolley alongside him. Hands snatched at Jarrah, pulling him aboard its trailer. It was badly overloaded, spilling passengers over the sides, but he was trapped by a press of

heaving, sweaty bodies. Most seemed as lost, as anxious as he was, but there were black-clad cultists among them too, so no one could voice their fears.

The trolley managed little more than Jarrah's running pace. Tunnel walls slid by with aching slowness. Not that he was eager to reach his destination.

Did his captors really expect him to fight for them? Perhaps so. For the first time, it struck him just how many labourers had painted stars on their faces. Jarrah glimpsed a familiar figure - an old foreman, someone he had once known well - and it compounded his misery to see that he was draped in black robes.

He felt the fighting long before he saw it.

He felt the ripples of grenade bursts thrumming through the floor. Waves of dry heat crashed across his face. Jarrah heard screams of anger, desperation, horror and death.

The tunnel vented into a part of the forge he hadn't visited before. The trolley was blocked by a writhing crush of bodies. Cultists were yelling orders, but Jarrah couldn't make them out above the clamour. Other passengers dismounted, so he followed their lead. He spent the next few minutes being pushed one way and pulled another. Whenever he picked a direction to strike out in, he collided with labourers coming the other way. Finally, he saw heavy tools being handed out from another trolley's flatbed. This gave him something to aim for, so he shouldered and elbowed his way forwards with some sense of purpose. He might feel less helpless, he reasoned, with a weapon in his grip.

He had almost reached the trolley when a firm hand landed on his shoulder. Jarrah turned and caught his breath in horror at the sight of a cultist behind him. He had never been touched by one before, and his skin crawled.

He could smell corruption on the cultist's breath. He willed himself not to recoil, to stand firm as if he had nothing to

hide. Narrowed, dark eyes glared into Jarrah's soul. Then, to his immense surprise, the cultist thrust a gun into his hands. It was a las-rifle, brand new and gleaming.

He gaped at it. He wanted to ask, *Why me?* But the cultist was gone, and he was caught up in the tides of the crowd again. This time, they were pulling him in a definite direction, towards a broad, railed gallery overlooking a vast, high-ceilinged space. Ahead of Jarrah and around him, terrified but browbeaten labourers wielded hammers and wrenches and soldering irons in the service of the heretics who had held them hostage, defiled and brutalised them.

They reached the gallery, where black-robed marshals separated them into streams flowing left and right. The sounds of battle were deafening here, coming from below, drowning out the clatters of boot steps on metal mesh flooring. The air was hot, black and heavy with clouds of soot, but shot through with explosive flashes. All Jarrah could do was clench his teeth, keep his head down and weather the storm.

He stumbled against the gallery rail and, for a terrible, stomach-plunging instant, thought he would topple over it. He caught himself, gaping into a fiery pit. He was overlooking an assembly hangar, he realised. Six angular shapes stood in two rows of three, as if ready to roll out through the gates. They were Basilisks, mobile artillery platforms, four of them with Earthshaker cannons fitted.

Their attackers had sundered the gates and were pouring through them. Jarrah couldn't see them properly through the smoke that wreathed them, but he saw no shining armour. They were met by ten times as many armed labourers, crashing into them with curdling screams and wrenches raised, many cut down in a bloody instant by las-beams or bayonets.

The invaders were swarming the Basilisks, which were pinned down, unable to manoeuvre. Their hull-mounted bolters jerked wildly, spraying bullets, hitting as many

friends as foes. An Earthshaker belched out an incendiary shell with an apocalyptic roar. It streaked through the broken gates, but the blinding flames of its explosion billowed back into the hangar to consume scores of labourers.

More marshals loomed ahead of Jarrah. They were directing people to gaps in the gallery rail, from which long, narrow steel ladders plunged into the abyss. Those few who balked at descending were thrashed into submission with sticks or cut with blades. One man was bundled over the rail and fell, screaming.

Jarrah's palms sweated into the stock of his lasgun. Little good it would do him, he thought, amid such carnage. A braver man would have turned the weapon upon the nearest cultists, maybe taking one life in exchange for his own. Perhaps, if he had more faith in his aim... Instead, when his turn came, Jarrah tucked the lasgun awkwardly under one arm, clambered onto a ladder and began to descend.

The climb down seemed to take forever.

The cultists were herding more and more people onto the ladder. It strained and shook under their writhing weight. Jarrah clung for his life to each rung, but couldn't falter lest his head feel the heavy boot of the man above him. All he could do when this happened - which was often - was stamp on the head below in turn.

More than one labourer plummeted past him. A flailing hand snatched at Jarrah's coveralls but, panicking, he shook it loose lest he be dragged down after it. At last, he felt something under his feet again. The hangar floor, he thought, but it yielded and shifted beneath him. He had alighted onto a heap of mangled corpses. Jarrah couldn't bear to look at them. He scrambled away as quickly as he could.

He was swept up by another streaming crowd. This time, he tried to fight it. He looked for an escape route. He

glimpsed a doorway at the hangar's rear, leading back into the forge, but it was guarded. More labourers were stepping off the ladders from the gallery, and those who didn't move with the heaving throng were dragged under and trampled to death.

Jarrah found himself funnelled between two of the Basilisks. One had repulsed its attackers, for now, and was edging forwards. He winced as its cannon fired, blotting out all other sounds. The other tank had been cracked open. Smoke billowed from its seams, while burnt skeletons manned the crew compartment.

He couldn't yet see the invaders, but they couldn't be too far ahead. He was treading on the bodies of those who had preceded him, and they were piling up. Jarrah's only hope now was to signal somehow to the Krieg men that he was an ally, an innocent in need of their protection. A desperate hope. More likely, an exploding shell would wipe him out before they even saw him.

He remembered his lasgun. The cultists - and the desperate, unreasoning labourers around him - were expecting him to use it. Jarrah didn't have a target, but he squinted through his iron sights to show willing. His elbows were jostled and he almost lost his balance. Taking time to aim was not an option. He raised his barrel over the heads in front of him, and a little bit higher for safety. He teased back the trigger.

The gun disgorged a blazing fusillade of energy beams. Jarrah started and almost cried out, though there was little recoil. The weapon was set to automatic. He hadn't realised. He prayed he hadn't actually hit anyone. He couldn't tell.

Another two men dropped out of his line of sight - Jarrah didn't know why, what had befallen them - and he stumbled into the space vacated.

And saw them.

Krieg soldiers. Six of them. Little wonder they had been so indistinct from above, as they were clad entirely in black.

Just like the cultists. They wore black greatcoats, helmets and plates of flak armour. Jarrah found his gaze riveted to their black masks, whose opaque lenses gave them an eerie semblance of hollow-eyed skulls.

The masked men fought tirelessly. Swarmed by panicky labourers, too confined to use their guns, they fought with knives and fists but struck with terrible, almost rhythmic precision, like the forge's great, repetitive machines. They cut down their stumbling, inexpert foes in bloody swathes.

Jarrah's heart tightened as first one Krieg man then two more were finally brought down, by force of numbers. He didn't know whether to feel dismayed or relieved. At least one fallen soldier struggled on, dragging two men to the ground on top of him. At the same time, one of his fellows plucked a grenade from his belt.

He lobbed it over the heads of his attackers. The grenade dropped into the midst of the crowd, somewhere behind Jarrah, close enough for the furnace heat of its blast to wash over him. The crowd convulsed, thrusting him forward, and suddenly there were four more Krieg men directly ahead of him.

Jarrah couldn't tell them from the others: they might have been the fallen soldiers risen, for all he knew. They wore the same black masks and battled with the same single-minded purpose.

A braver man might have done something. A smarter man might have known what to do. Jarrah froze as a featureless, black-masked face turned towards him. *An ally*, he reminded himself - but he saw no kinship in the Death Korps soldier's blank eyes. He saw no mercy, no reason, no compassion. How could there be?

The Krieg man's arm drew back, a metal glint in a black-gloved hand.

Jarrah barely registered a sudden blur of motion, as something hurtled past his right ear. That something - some multi-limbed, fleshy grey horror - crashed into the Krieg

man in a flurry of claws and teeth and gore. A second later, both were gone, as if neither had been real at all but only Jarrah's worst fears made manifest.

He broke out in prickles of sweat at the thought of how close he had been to death and what had saved him - or rather just bought him more seconds.

The soldiers filled his field of vision now: a horde of skull-masked apparitions surging towards him, relentless, unstoppable. A few other labourers with guns blasted desperately at them, and some Krieg men fell, and yet their ranks never thinned out. Not a single soldier conceded a single step. They had no fear for their lives. Each of them was content to be blasted to pieces if he could gain an inch of ground.

Nor did they pause to distinguish friend from foe.

There were monsters on both sides of this conflict. Jarrah wondered why he hadn't seen it before. The Death Korps of Krieg were inhuman killing machines - sent by the Emperor not to save him, but to destroy him.

It was his last conscious thought for some time. He didn't see the cause of the explosion. He was only aware of it for the briefest possible instant, before his senses shut down to save his sanity.

He thought he must have died.

When Jarrah woke again, he couldn't breathe.

His reaction was instinctive. He scrabbled his way upwards, feeling heavy weights sliding from atop him. He emerged into gossamer light and lay with his chest heaving. Smoke filled his lungs, and he coughed up blood-flecked bile. His body was beginning to react to its tribulations, every nerve lighting up with throbbing pain.

He didn't know where he was, for a moment.

His head felt stuffed with cotton wool. White fog enveloped the world, so he could see no more than a few feet in any direction. In those few feet, he saw rubble and dismembered

bodies. As reason reasserted itself, he knew he couldn't have moved far. Rather, it was everything else that had shifted around him.

The front end of the assembly hangar had collapsed. Jarrah, fortunately, had been far enough back to avoid being buried completely. Still, heavy hunks of black rock had crashed down on top of him. He should probably have died.

Through a bleak, mournful silence, he heard wracking sobs and a weak voice pleading for help. So, others had been spared as well as him. Dimly, through a nightmare haze, he realised that some of the weight pinning him down had been soft and warm. He had been lucky. He could make no better sense of it.

He didn't know how long he lay there, his thoughts tumbling into each other. The collapse, he could only assume, had been deliberate. The cultists had sent their captives to die for them for one reason alone: to buy them time. Time to lay explosive charges. They had sealed off the breach in Blackfire's walls, at the same time crushing its invaders - and many of its labourers.

Jarrah heard a familiar muffled rumble of thunder. The siege guns outside had already started up again. He recalled what the sallow-faced old man had told him, about the Krieg soldiers' inexhaustible patience. They may have been forced to withdraw, but they hadn't gone far.

For now, however, the battle was over. Jarrah closed his eyes, and may even have slept again. He stirred as the rubble across which he was sprawled began to shift. He heard voices, but couldn't tell how far away they were. He stopped himself from calling out, until he knew to whom the voices belonged.

He tried to stand, but his left foot was still trapped.

Jarrah tried to pull it free, but a sharp pain lanced through his ankle. He scrabbled desperately at the rubble that pinned him, but only tore his fingernails and slickened his palms with blood. His head spun, and he had to close his

eyes and breathe deeply. Whatever jolt of adrenaline had kept him going thus far, it had more than run its course. He felt drained.

He forced himself to work on his problem more methodically. It took him long, anxious minutes, but he finally freed his foot and raised himself up onto hollow-feeling, shaky legs. Looking down, he saw his lasgun, nestled between two hunks of plascrete, scuffed and battered. He stooped to retrieve it.

He took one faltering, lurching step after another. Debris shifted underneath his weight, and threatened to plunge him back down into the blackness.

A dark shape erupted from the ground in front of him. Jarrah stumbled back, scrambling to bring his weapon to bear. He had disturbed a body, but one with some life in it yet. Was it friend or foe? With a sickly knot forming inside him, Jarrah realised that he no longer knew which was which.

The body belonged to a Death Korps soldier. His right arm hung at an awkward angle from his shoulder, clearly shattered. He had lost his helmet, and blood seeped through his black mask. His greatcoat was shredded. Jarrah could hear his hoarse, laboured breathing. For the first time, he saw that the mask was connected by a flexible tube to a respirator on the soldier's chest. It was a trivial detail, but it made him realise that this was just a man, after all. A broken man.

The soldier, sensing Jarrah's approach, had levered himself up into a crouch. No one else was in sight. This was Jarrah's chance. He opened his mouth to explain why he was here, to unburden himself of the hell he had been put through, to ask this emissary of the Emperor what to do.

He didn't know where to start. He hadn't spoken in so long, and the words - too many words - caught in his throat, contriving with the smoke and the dust in the air to choke him into tearful silence.

Jarraah glimpsed his own reflection in black lenses. He saw how he must look to the Krieg man in his filthy, torn coveralls. He saw the eight-pointed star etched on his face in soot. He saw the gun clutched tightly in his hands – the gun with which his cultist masters had entrusted him to kill their enemies.

In that same moment, he saw what the soldier was doing.

A lasgun hung limply from his broken fingers. Somehow, he had maintained a stubborn grip upon it – and now, with his good hand, he was reaching carefully for it, even as his hollow gaze remained fixed upon Jarraah.

As the Krieg man's hand found and closed around the weapon, a scream exploded from Jarraah's lungs: *'No!'* And, almost before he knew it, without conscious thought, he had snapped up his own gun and fired it, screaming again, *'No!'*

Las-beams impaled the Krieg man's chest like needles of light. His body jerked and thrashed, but didn't fall. Jarraah watched in horror as, in slow motion, or so it seemed, a gun barrel swept up towards him.

He screamed, for a third time, *'No!'* and squeezed his trigger again.

He realised that his eyes were closed tight. He forced them open.

The Krieg man lay on his back at Jarraah's feet. He wasn't moving. Jarraah couldn't tell if he was dead or not. The mask, with its black lenses, gave the eerie impression that he was still conscious, glaring up at his would-be killer.

Jarraah shuddered and fired into the soldier's body again. And again. When he squeezed his trigger the fifth time, his gun just clicked and whined, its power pack dry. Jarraah let it slip from his numbed fingers. His overalls were wringing with sweat, and he was trembling.

He heard footsteps and raised voices, converging upon him.

The forge had been besieged for twenty-eight days.

Jarrah was back at his cannon emplacement. He had learned how to operate the Earthshaker – it was easier than he had imagined – and now served as its gunner. He had a single new loader, whose name he didn't know, but who frustrated Jarrah with his slowness.

His old crewmates were missing, almost certainly dead. Blackfire's dark tunnels seemed quieter than ever before, though ghosts danced in their shadows; but at least the food supplies stretched further now.

Jarrah was just glad to have things back the way they had been, more or less.

The Death Korps of Krieg still hunkered in their trenches, pounding at the forge. Why couldn't they leave him alone? He answered their bombardment with blast after blast of his own. He adjusted the Earthshaker's sights between each one. The less predictably his shells fell, the more hindrance they would be. If he was lucky, one might even fly far enough to cause some real damage.

No longer did Jarrah pray to the Emperor. He knew he had compromised too much to be forgiven. He refused to be ashamed of this, however. What choices had he had? He hadn't betrayed his god. His god had betrayed him.

When the cultists had found him in the assembly hangar's wreckage, standing over a Krieg man's corpse, they had hailed him as a hero. The eight-pointed star on his face had been freshly inscribed with ink. He wore the black cloak they had given him.

They had not yet invited him to join their secret rituals, and Jarrah was glad of this. The cultists' pursuit of power had so far sent a score among them mad and resulted in more hideous mutations. Still, they insisted that they were making progress. They just needed more time.

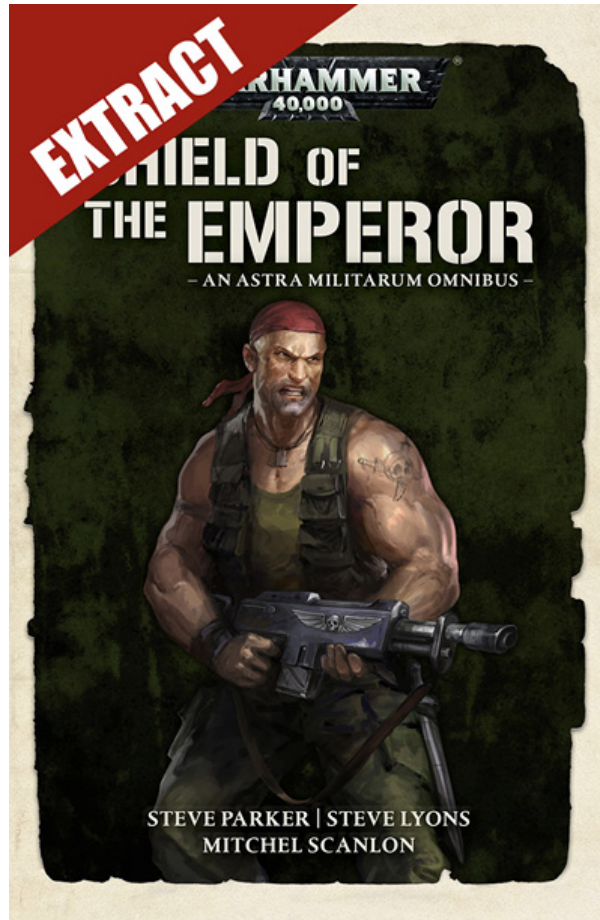
Every morning, every night, Jarrah prayed – though he didn't know to whom – for their success. He prayed for the walls of Blackfire Forge to hold. He knew that if the men of Krieg broke through those walls again, fortune would not

favour him a second time. Those monsters would butcher him and everyone else he knew.

He prayed for his new gods to save him.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR STEVE LYONS' WORK IN THE WARHAMMER 40,000 UNIVERSE INCLUDES THE NOVELLAS *ENGINES OF WAR* AND *ANGRON'S MONOLITH*, THE IMPERIAL GUARD NOVELS *ICE WORLD* AND *DEAD MEN WALKING* - NOW COLLECTED IN THE OMNIBUS *HONOUR IMPERIALIS* - AND THE AUDIO DRAMAS *WAITING DEATH* AND *THE MADNESS WITHIN*. HE HAS ALSO WRITTEN NUMEROUS SHORT STORIES AND IS CURRENTLY WORKING ON MORE TALES FROM THE GRIM DARKNESS OF THE FAR FUTURE.

An extract from *Shield of the Emperor*.



The sun was setting, its slow descent reddening the vast reaches of the westward sky and bathing the endless wheat fields below it in shades of gold and amber as they stirred gently in the evening breeze. In his seventeen years of life to date, Arvin Larn had seen perhaps a thousand such sunsets, there was something about the beauty of this one that gave him pause. Enraptured, his chores for the moment forgotten, for the first time since his childhood he simply stood and watched the setting of the sun. Stood there, with the world still and peaceful all about him, gazing toward the gathering fall of night as he felt a nameless emotion rising deep within his heart.

There will be other sunsets, he thought to himself. *Other suns, though none of them will mean as much to me as this one does, here and now. Nothing could mean as much as this moment does, standing here among these wheat fields, watching the last sunset I will ever see at home.*

Home. The mere thought of the word was enough to make him turn his head and look over his shoulder across the swaying rows of ripening grain toward the small collection of farm buildings on the other side of the field behind him. He saw the old barn with its sloping, wood-shingled roof. He saw the round tower of the grain silo; the ginny-hen coops

he had helped build with his father; the small stock pen where they kept the draft horses and a herd of half-a-dozen alpacas.

Most of all, he saw the farmhouse where he had been born and raised. Two-storeyed, with a low wooden porch out front and the shutters on the windows left open to let in the last of the light. Given the unchanging routines of his family's existence, Larn did not need to see inside to know what was happening within. His mother would be in the kitchen cooking the evening meal, his sisters helping her set the table, his father in the cellar workshop with his tools. Then, just as they did every night, once their chores were done the family would sit down at the table together and eat. Tomorrow night they would do the same again, the pattern of their lives repeating endlessly day after day, varying only with the changing of the seasons.

It was a pattern that had endured here for as long as anyone could remember. A pattern that would continue so long as there was anyone left to farm these lands. Though, come tomorrow night at least, there would be one small difference.

Come tomorrow, he would no longer be here to see it.

Sighing, Larn returned to his work, turning once more to the task of trying to repair the ancient rust-pitted irrigation pump in front of him. Before the sunset had distracted him he had removed the outer access panel to reveal the inner workings of the pump's motor. Now, in the fading light of twilight, he removed the motor's burnt-out starter and replaced it with a new one, mindful to say a prayer to the machine spirit inside it as he tightened and re-checked the connections.

Taking a spouted canister from beside the foot of the pump he dribbled a few drops of unguent from it into the workings. Then, satisfied everything was in order, he reached out for the large lever at the side and worked it slowly up and down a dozen times to prime the pump before

pressing the ignition stud to start the motor. Abruptly, the pump shuddered into noisy life, the motor whining as it strained to pull water up from aquifers lying deep below the ground. For a moment, Larn congratulated himself on a job well done. Until, just as the first few muddy drops of water emerged from the mouth of the pump to stain the dry earth of the irrigation trench before it, the motor coughed and died.

Disappointed, Larn pressed the ignition stud again. This time though, the motor stayed sullenly silent. Leaning forward, he carefully inspected the parts of the mechanism once more - checking the connections for corrosion, making sure the moving parts were well-lubricated and free from grit, searching for broken wires or worn components - all the things the mechanic-acolyte in Ferrusville had warned them about the last time the pump was serviced. Frustratingly, Larn could find nothing wrong. As far as he could see, the pump should be working.

Finally, reluctantly forced to concede defeat, Larn lifted the discarded access panel and began to screw it into place once more. He had so badly wanted to be able to fix the pump; with harvest time still three weeks away, it was important the farm's irrigation system should be in good working order. Granted, it had been a good season so far and the wheat was growing well but the life of a farmer was always enslaved to the weather. Without the irrigation system to fall back upon, a couple of dry weeks now could mean the difference between feast and famine for an entire year.

But in the end he knew that was only part of it. Standing there, looking down at the pump after he had screwed the panel back in place, Larn realised his reasons for wanting to see it repaired went far beyond such practical considerations. Like it or not, tomorrow he would be leaving the farm forever and saying farewell to the only land and life he had ever known, never to return. He understood now

that he had felt the need to perform some last act of service to those he would be leaving behind. He had wanted to complete some final labour on their behalf. An act of penance almost, to give closure to his grief.

This morning, when his father had asked him to look at the pump and see if he could fix it, it had seemed the perfect opportunity to achieve that aim. Now though, the recalcitrant machine spirits inside the pump and his own lack of knowledge had conspired against him. No matter how hard he tried, the pump was broken beyond his powers to repair it and his last act of penance would go unfulfilled.

Larn collected his tools together and made ready to turn for home, only to pause again as he noticed a change in the sunset. Ahead, the sun had already half disappeared below the horizon, while the sky around it had turned a deeper and more angry red. What gave him pause was not the sun or the sky, but the fields below them. Where once they had been bathed in spectacular shades of gold and amber, now the colour of the fields had become more uniform, changing to a dark and unsettling shade of brownish red, like the colour of blood. At the same time the evening breeze had risen almost imperceptibly, catching the rows of wheat in the fields and causing them to flow and shift before Larn's eyes as though the fields themselves had become some vast and restless sea. *It could almost be a sea of blood*, he said to himself, the very thought of it causing him to shiver a little.

A sea of blood.

And, try as hard as he might, he could read no good omen in that sign.

By the time Larn had put his tools away, the sun had all but set. Leaving the barn behind, he walked towards the farmhouse, the yellow glow of lamplight barely visible ahead of him through the slats of the wooden shutters now closed over the farmhouse windows. Stepping onto the porch Larn

lifted the latch to the front door and walked inside, carefully removing his boots at the threshold so as not to track mud from the fields into the hallway. Then, leaving the boots just inside the doorway, he walked down the hall towards the kitchen, unconsciously making the sign of the aquila with his fingers as he passed the open door of the sitting room with its devotional picture of the Emperor hung over the fireplace.

Reaching the kitchen he found it deserted, the smell of woodsmoke and the delicious aromas of all his favourite foods rising from the pans simmering on the stove. Roasted xorncob, boiled derna beans, alpaca stew and taysenberry pie; together, the dishes of the last meal he would ever eat at home. Abruptly it occurred to him, in whatever years of his life might yet come, those self-same aromas would forever now be linked with a feeling of desperate sadness.

Ahead, the kitchen table was already laid out with plates and cutlery ready for the meal. As he stepped past the table toward the sink, he remembered returning from the fields two nights earlier to find his parents sitting in the kitchen waiting for him, the black-edged parchment of the induction notice lying mutely on the table between them. From the first it had been obvious they had both been crying, their eyes red and raw from grief. He had not needed to ask them the reason for their tears. Their expressions, and the Imperial eagle embossed on the surface of the parchment, had said it all.

Now, as he moved past the table Larn spotted the same parchment lying folded in half on top of one of the kitchen cupboards. Diverted from his original intentions, he walked towards it. Then, picking up the parchment and unfolding it, he found himself once more reading the words written there below the official masthead.

Citizens of Jumael IV, the parchment read. Rejoice! In accordance with Imperial Law and the powers of his Office, your Governor has decreed two new regiments of the

Imperial Guard are to be raised from among his people. Furthermore, he has ordered those conscripted to these new regiments are to be assembled with all due haste, so that they may begin their training without delay and take their place among the most Holy and Righteous armies of the Blessed Emperor of All Mankind.

From there the parchment went on to list the names of those who had been conscripted, outlining the details of the mustering process and emphasising the penalties awaiting anyone who failed to report. Larn did not need to read the rest of it – in the last two days he had read the parchment so many times he knew the words by heart. Yet despite all that, as though unable to stop picking at the scab of a half-healed wound, he continued to read the words written on the parchment before him.

‘Arvin?’ He heard his mother’s voice behind him, breaking his chain of thought. ‘You startled me, standing there like that. I didn’t hear you come in.’

Turning, Larn saw his mother standing beside him, a jar of kuedin seeds in her hand and her eyes red with recently dried tears.

‘I just got here, Ma,’ he said, feeling vaguely embarrassed as he put the parchment back where he had found it. ‘I finished my chores, and thought I should wash my hands before dinner.’

For a moment his mother stood there quietly staring at him. Facing her in uncomfortable silence, Larn realised how hard it was for her to speak at all now she knew she would be losing him tomorrow. It lent their every word a deeper meaning, making even the most simple of conversations difficult while with every instant there was the threat that a single ill-chosen word might release the painful tide of grief welling up inside her.

‘You took your boots off?’ she said at last, retreating to the commonplace in search of safety.

‘Yes, Ma. I left them just inside the hallway.’

‘Good,’ she said. ‘You’d better clean them tonight, so as to be ready for tomorrow...’ At that word his mother paused, her voice on the edge of breaking, her teeth biting her lower lip and her eyelids closed as though warding off a distant sensation of pain. Then, half turning away so he could no longer see her eyes, she spoke again.

‘But anyway, you can do that later,’ she said. ‘For now, you’d better go down to the cellar. Your Pa’s already down there and he said he wanted to see you when you got back from the fields.’

Turning further away from him now, she moved over to the stove and lifted the lid off one of the pans to drop a handful of kuedin seeds into it. Ever the dutiful son, Larn turned away. Towards the cellar and his father.

The cellar steps creaked noisily as Larn made his way down them. Despite the noise, at first his father did not seem to notice his approach. Lost in concentration, he sat bent over his workbench at the far end of the cellar, a whetstone in his hand as he sharpened his wool-shears. For a moment, watching his father unawares as he worked, Larn felt almost like a ghost – as though he had passed from his family’s world already and they could no longer see or hear him. Then, finding the thought of it gave him a shiver, he spoke at last and broke the silence.

‘You wanted to see me, Pa?’

Starting at the sound of his voice, his father laid the shears and the whetstone down before turning to look towards his son and smile.

‘You startled me, Arv,’ he said. ‘Zell’s oath, but you can walk quiet when you’ve a mind to. So, did you manage to fix the pump?’

‘Sorry, Pa,’ Larn said. ‘I tried replacing the starter and every other thing I could think of, but none of it worked.’

‘You tried your best, son,’ his father said. ‘That’s all that matters. Besides, the machine spirits in that pump are so

old and ornery the damned thing never worked right half the time anyway. I'll have to see if I can get a mechanic to come out from Ferrusville to give it a good look-over next week. In the meantime, the rain's been pretty good so we shouldn't have a problem. But anyway, there was something else I wanted to see you about. Why don't you grab yourself a stool so the two of us men can talk?'

Pulling an extra stool from beneath the workbench, his father gestured for him to sit down. Then, waiting until he saw his son had made himself comfortable, he began once more.

'I don't suppose I ever told you too much about your great-grandfather before, did I?' he said.

'I know he was an off-worlder, Pa,' Larn said, earnestly. 'And I know his name was Augustus, same as my middle name is.'

'True enough,' his father replied. 'It was a tradition on your great-grandfather's world to pass on a family name to the first-born son in every generation. Course, he was long dead by the time you were born. Mind you, he died even before I was born. But he was a good man, and so we did it to honour him all the same. A good man should always be honoured, they say, no matter how long he's been dead.'

For a moment, his face grave and thoughtful, his father fell silent. Then, as though he had made some decision, he raised his face up to look his son clearly in the eye and spoke again.

'As I say, your great-grandfather was dead long before I could have known him, Arvie. But when I was seventeen and just about to come of age my father called me down into this cellar and told me the tale of him - just like I'm about to tell you now. You see, my father had decided that before I became a man it was important I knew where I came from. And I'm glad he did, 'cause what he told me then has stood me in good stead ever since. Just like I'm hoping that what I'm going to tell you now will stand you in good stead

likewise. Course, with what's happened in the last few days - and where you're bound for - I've got extra reasons for telling it to you. Reasons that, Emperor love him, my own father never had to face. But that's the way of things: each generation has its own sorrows, and has to make the best of them they can. That's all as may be, though. Guess I should just stop dancing around it and come out and say what it is I have to say.'

Again, as though wrestling inwardly for the right words, his father paused. As he waited for him to begin, Larn found himself suddenly thinking how old his father looked. Gazing at him as though for the first time he became aware of the lines and creases across his father's face, the slightly rounded slump of his shoulders, the spreading fingers of grey in his once black and lustrous hair. Signs of aging he would have sworn had not been there a week previously. It was almost as though his father had aged a decade in the last few days.

'Your great-grandfather was in the Imperial Guard,' his father said at last. 'Just like you're going to be.' Then, seeing his son about to blurt out a string of questions, he held his hand up to gesture silence. 'You can ask whatever you want later, Arvie. For now, it's better if you just let me tell it to you like my father told me. Believe me, once you've heard it you'll know why it is I said I thought you should hear it.'

Hanging on every word in the quiet stillness of the cellar, Larn heard his father tell his tale.

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