



WARHAMMER
40,000

LEFT FOR DEAD



STEVE LYONS

A detailed illustration of a Space Marine from the Warhammer 40,000 universe. The character is wearing a dark blue trench coat with gold buttons and a skull emblem on the shoulder. He is also wearing a helmet with a gold eagle emblem and a respirator mask. He is holding a large, futuristic firearm. The background is a textured, greyish-brown surface.

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Steve Lyons

The war on Parius Monumentus was over.

Hive Opus had been pried from the claws of depravity, thank the Emperor! Blessed order was finally restored.

The Astra Militarum could claim the victory. The local militia, chronically undermanned, had misjudged the spread of corruption; it had overtaken and overwhelmed them, forcing them to transmit an astropathic distress call.

A Death Korps of Krieg regiment had arrived to take control, and for a full month, day and night, the sky had flashed and thundered to the relentless beat of their siege guns. The city's walls had shuddered and inexorably crumbled. Its decadent captors had been put to flight – and then, most of them, to the sword.

The Korpsmen had departed, with other wars on other worlds to fight. Silence had settled in their wake – only long enough for the Emperor's loyal subjects to breathe a collective prayer of relief. Then the real work had begun.

The sky now resounded with the roars of construction vehicles. The shattered debris of habs and factorums groaned beneath the weight of caterpillar tracks. The gilt-edged finery of the city's cathedrals, reduced to fragments, was shovelled away by claw blades. Exposed guts of great mining machines spat and hissed and touched off fires.

Jarvan was a corporal in the Parius Interior Guard.

He was new to the rank since his predecessor had been captured and butchered by the enemy, and was eager to prove himself. He had charge of a labour gang, one of thousands: just under a hundred weary and traumatised civilians charged with sifting through the wreckage, recovering what they could. Whip-wielding servitors stood over them, encouraging them in these duties.

Thus it was that Corporal Jarvan encountered the stranger.

His labour gang was dragging bodies from a fallen hab-block. They had found a number of survivors yesterday; not quite so many today. Tomorrow, they would be reassigned to a higher priority area. Power was yet to be restored to this hive sector. Freestanding lumen units coughed and sputtered out sprays of pale white light, between which lurked brooding shadows.

Jarvan turned his head at just the moment to see a shape flitting through those shadows. One with no right to be there. He snapped up his rifle with its flashlight attachment, pinpointing the figure of a man.

His skin was pale, as with any lower-level hive-dweller deprived of direct sunlight. He was young and wiry, with a military buzz cut. Jarvan's eyes were immediately drawn to the lasgun in his hand, though the

stranger wasn't aiming it.

'Drop the weapon! *Drop it!* Down on your knees. Lace your hands behind your head.' The stranger complied with each instruction in turn.

'Identify yourself,' the corporal demanded.

The stranger didn't answer. He knelt, staring at Jarvan with dull eyes, unblinking. Jarvan thought he might be a soldier. He had the build and bearing of one, but no uniform. He wore a set of shapeless grey coveralls, singed, tattered and soiled.

'Identify yourself,' repeated Jarvan. 'Name and rank?'

'Don't remember,' said the stranger, the words catching in his throat.

Drawing closer, Jarvan saw that the stranger's head was cut. Blood had crusted around the wound and striped his cheek. He was probably concussed. The corporal motioned to the nearest of his labourers; he hadn't bothered to remember their names or faces. He sent three of them to strip the stranger and search him.

He didn't resist.

One labourer brought the stranger's weapon to Jarvan. At a glance, he could see that it wasn't *Parius* issue. He had seen enough like it in recent weeks, however. The lasgun was modified to fire a more powerful shot, but at a cost. Extra sink rings had been fitted around its barrel to bleed off excess heat. It bore the stamp of the Imperial forges on *Lucius*, which made it *Krieg* property.

'Where did you get this?'

The stranger didn't answer him. His eyes remained fixed upon Jarvan as the labourers ran calloused hands over him, searching for tattoos or mutations. They reported that the stranger was clean – and one of them had found his ident papers. At the corporal's impatient urging, he read out the details haltingly.

'His name is, uh, *Arvo*, sir. Registered to... this sector. He's a menial, third-grade.'

Jarvan was almost disappointed. So much fuss, he thought, for a maintenance drudge. He must have taken the lasgun from a fallen trooper. Likely had no idea how to use it. Jarvan was inclined to shoot him on the spot and save a *medicae*'s time and effort.

He lowered his rifle instead, crouching to inspect the stranger's eyes. Clear enough, he judged. He straightened up, beckoning to his labourers again. 'Take him to the *medicae* and be swift about it. Back in twenty minutes or I'll have you both flogged.' More than enough time had been wasted on distractions. He had no intention of missing his end-of-shift quotas.

The stranger was hauled out of Corporal Jarvan's sight and, almost as quickly, faded from his thoughts.

The *medicae* facility was no quieter than anywhere else. The air buzzed with urgent shouts, rushing footsteps and the howls and screams and dying gurgles of the untended wounded.

In fact, the word 'facility' over-dignified this place: a makeshift camp strewn between the cranes and hoists of a broken-down *factorum*. A hundred drudges scrubbed the walls, only gradually eroding centuries of ingrained soot. Their mops swirled fresher vomit and blood around the floor. Haggard medics stumbled between them, red-eyed and dishevelled, urgent pleas pulling them in all directions.

The man known as *Arvo* was dumped on a creaking gurney. He lay on his back and let the clamour wash over him. It merged with the ringing in his head to deny him the sleep he sorely needed. He breathed in the stench of infected and diseased bodies. Occasionally, he slipped into a fitful doze, to be woken by a gunshot. For many of his fellow patients, it appeared, a bullet to the brain was the most efficient treatment.

For hours, only two people showed *Arvo* any attention. The first was an *Administratum* clerk who checked his papers, tapped his details into a data-slate, clicked his tongue to himself and moved away. The second was a middle-aged woman, dripping piously with religious symbols, who searched him as the

labourers at the hab-block had searched him, for signs of Chaos corruption.

In between these interruptions, his mind fled to the recent past.

Hive Opus had been split open, its cannons silenced. The Death Korps had risen from their trenches and surged forwards. They were strafed with small-arms fire, to no avail. For every skull-masked figure cut down, two more appeared to replace him. Their advance continued, unstoppable. A tidal wave of screaming madness.

Their enemies were worshippers of excess, wanton revellers in carnal pleasure. They possessed not a fraction of the Korpsmen's iron discipline. In the face of the Emperor's holy vengeance, they broke. Holes gaped open within the cultists' masses, into which the Korpsmen poured and widened them with guns, combat knives and the strength of their own sinews.

Arvo's head rang to each beat of the battle. His ears had been deadened, his eyes flash-blinded by a bursting grenade. The stink of blood and fire, cordite and death assailed his nostrils. He lay on his stomach in the dirt, pinned down. Blood crawled, hot and sticky, down his right cheek.

His vision was beginning to clear, though it was still blurred. Shapes shifted around him, through a thickening smoke haze. He must have briefly lost consciousness as the battlefield had passed over him. Death Korpsmen surrounded him, encased in flak armour and heavy greatcoats. Their boots pulverised the debris beside his head.

How inhuman they looked, he thought, with their faces concealed behind rebreather masks so that even their eyes were hidden. From this lowly vantage point, he couldn't tell one from another.

They must have seen him, in turn, but no one came to help him. Why would they? He was nothing but a stranger to them too – and each Korpsman was looking for a clear shot at the enemy, through the crush of his comrades before him, following an imperative drilled into him from birth. Pushing forward, ever forward.

Then, minutes, hours or days had passed, and they were gone.

Arvo barely remembered dragging himself to his feet, throwing off the hunks of masonry that had piled up on his back. He found himself, for the very first time in his life, alone. He had clung to his lasgun throughout his ordeal, so hard the fingers of his right hand had seized up around its trigger guard.

His mask had been knocked askew. The rebreather unit on his chest was dented and inoperative. He shucked off his coat and discarded his broken equipment. The air was unpleasant, but at least it wasn't toxic, not like the air of his birth world. Not like Krieg.

The man who would be known as Arvo held his mask in his gloved hands. He stared at the reflection of a face he didn't recognise in its blank, skull-eye sockets and an unfamiliar thought, an unworthy thought, occurred to him.

He was free.

Arvo was yanked back to the present, and to his makeshift sickbed.

A medicae squinted at him through an augmetic eyepiece. He clicked his fingers at a servitor, which trundled over. It brought up a heavy hypodermic arm, inside which serum-filled tubes cycled until one locked into place. The servitor thrust a huge needle into Arvo's stomach and a chemical bolt dulled his pain and tiredness, sharpening his mind.

'Discharged,' the medicae grunted, turning away from him.

Arvo called after him, 'No, wait. Where do I go?'

'No further treatment necessary. Discharged.' The medicae hovered over another patient, presenting his back to Arvo. 'Full recovery impossible. Termination advised,' he pronounced in this case, and moved on.

Arvo climbed off the gurney. The moment his feet touched the floor, a pair of drudges deposited an unconscious woman in his place. Their downcast eyes avoided his and he chose not to question them. He was wary of asking too many questions. He took his papers – rather, *Arvo's* papers – from his pocket. He found an address on them. A hab? It wasn't clear. He had never known such a thing.

Other discharged patients were joining a line. It stretched from a desk at which a middle-aged man worked unhurriedly. Arvo followed the line out of the building, halfway around a city block. He eavesdropped as someone else asked what the line was for and was told 'habitation and labour assignments.'

He took his place at the back of the line and waited.

He spoke only once, when someone behind him grumbled that his sprained ankle hadn't been bandaged. 'The Emperor gives us all we need,' snapped Arvo, 'and resources must be managed.' He regretted abandoning his depleted medi-kit along with his uniform. He could have sterilised his head wound.

'Name and ident number?' asked the desk clerk, three hours later.

He thumbed a data-slate, nodding occasionally to himself. Arvo waited, half-expecting the clerk to uncover his deception as soon as he looked up and saw his face.

'Your hab-sector has been condemned, I see. I'm assigning you to a shelter and a labour gang.' The clerk took the stub of a pencil to Arvo's papers, made and initialled some amendments, and slid them back across the desk. He didn't glance at Arvo at all. Checking his wrist chrono, he said, 'Your first work shift begins at twenty-six-hundred hours. The time now is twenty-four-eighteen. Next!'

Public vehicles were leaving the medicae camp all the time, dispersing ex-patients across the sprawling, multi-layered city. Now Arvo knew what was expected of him, he acted accordingly. Among the bleary-eyed crowd, he located six others bound for his sector and an Interior Guard groundcar and driver to take them there.

Arvo rode on the fender as they snaked their way through burning industrial blocks and around impassable thoroughfares. He drank in the sounds, sights and smells of a world unlike any he had seen before, a world that few of his kind would ever see: a broken world, for sure, but a world – for the moment – at peace. Arvo's new world.

The girl watched Arvo for four days before she dared approach him.

Her labour gang, now his gang too, was excavating a collapsed grain store. Their Interior Guard overseer had impressed upon them the import of this task. Emergency supplies had been requested from the closest agri world, but thousands could starve waiting for them.

Arvo had one of the larger tools: a pickaxe. He was shattering the biggest, most intractable hunks of debris so that others could scoop them up with shovels. The girl had a shovel and had worked her way closer to him.

As soon as she was allowed, she took a beaker of water to him.

'Hello,' she said. 'My name is Zanne.'

He responded with a disinterested grunt. He swung his axe, shattered stone, hefted the axe again. He didn't take the water from her. She had rarely seen Arvo talking to anyone else. This had been by choice to begin with. Having been rebuffed, however, his fellow labourers now tended to shun him.

'Your name is Arvo,' Zanne persisted. 'I heard the overseer say so.'

'Yes,' he allowed. 'My name is Arvo.'

'And you're from Hab-Sector Kappa-Two-Phi. I used to live there.'

Arvo swung his axe, shattered stone, hefted the axe again.

'How did you get so strong?'

This question fazed him, just a little, interrupting his rhythm.

‘I think you’re the strongest in our gang,’ Zanne told him. He was, in fact, easily the best and most tireless worker among them. She didn’t think the servitors had ever had to whip him. The others often talked about him in resentful tones because he made them look idle, more deserving of the lash in comparison.

‘The work is good,’ Arvo grunted.

Zanne was surprised. ‘You enjoy it?’

‘It is good to build, to improve things rather than destroy them.’

She considered that statement, chewing on her lower lip. ‘Yes,’ she agreed at length, ‘I suppose it is.’

A servitor wheeled its ponderous frame their way. Quickly, Zanne dropped to her knees and began to shovel again. She set Arvo’s beaker down beside him. ‘You should drink it,’ she insisted. ‘You don’t know when there’ll be more. This is good water too, hardly any slime in it. Some days, there is none at all.’

Arvo looked at her for the first time. ‘How old are you?’

‘Eleven,’ said Zanne proudly. ‘Ten and three-quarters, really, but I’ve been looking after myself since I was six.’

‘What happened to your...?’ He struggled to find the right word.

‘My parents? I don’t remember my dad. He died when I was a little girl. They said it was a monster that got loose in the mines. Then Mum was ill and I had to look after her. I had to work to earn food for us to eat. But she died too.’

‘The illness took her?’

Zanne shook her head.

‘The cultists, then?’

‘She was in our hab-block when it collapsed. The blasphemers were hiding in there, you see, so the soldiers had to—’

Arvo’s eyes narrowed. A muscle in his cheek twitched. ‘The soldiers killed her?’

‘They had no choice. They had to stop the blasphemers. For the Emperor.’ Zanne spoke in a perfectly matter-of-fact tone, as if relating something she had read in a book. Her life, she had always been taught, was what it was and there was no point being sad about that. Self-pity, in fact, was the very worst kind of ingratitude.

She was almost grateful for the hard work too. It kept her mind busy.

Arvo pushed his untouched beaker towards her. ‘Here,’ he said. ‘You drink it.’

He didn’t have to offer twice. Zanne downed the quenching water in one gulp. The servitor, it transpired, was still watching her; she felt its lash across her shoulders for taking more than her share, but it was worth it. What was one more stripe to add to all the others? She wiped her lips on her filthy, ragged sleeve.

‘I did not mean to get you in trouble,’ Arvo mumbled, once the servitor’s attention was safely elsewhere again.

‘It wasn’t your fault,’ Zanne assured him.

‘We have our orders,’ said Arvo stiffly, ‘and we must follow them.’

Between work shifts, they ate, slept and did little else, alongside a thousand others in a designated refugee shelter.

The building had been a chapel, but was desecrated beyond hope of salvation. Wooden pews had been hacked to pieces, stained-glass windows shattered. Blood and faeces had been scrubbed from the walls

but had left a lingering pungent scent – while the outlines of spray-painted blasphemies endured.

Arvo collected his ration of gruel that night and, as always, consumed it sitting cross-legged on his blanket. Tonight, for the first time, someone joined him. He didn't object to Zanne's presence, though again it was left to her to break the silence.

'Do you have any family?' she asked him.

Arvo shook his head.

'What, never? But you must have. There must have been someone. Everyone has a mum and a dad, even if they never—'

Arvo interrupted her angrily. 'I had no one. Nothing. Just a...'. He checked himself, as if regretting his candour. He sighed. 'I do not belong here.'

Zanne longed to ask what he meant by that. She had had her first glimpse behind the stranger's façade, however, and feared what else she might unleash. She summoned her courage anyway. She had never met anyone unlike herself before; she wanted to know everything about him. But as she opened her mouth, her moment was stolen.

A howl of rage and panicked yelling emerged from one of the transepts.

Arvo was on his feet before Zanne had seen him move. His bowl clattered to the tiled floor, spilling its contents. Zanne, too, was brushed aside. While others gaped and cowered, too weary and afraid to act, Arvo waded through them. Zanne began to follow him but stopped, suddenly afraid.

A man burst from the transept: gangly, half-dressed and dirty, wild-eyed with a straggly, lice-infested beard. He screamed in a way that Zanne had seen few times before, like a man possessed, scattering those around him with the force of his insanity.

A few braver souls tried to catch him, struggling for a grip on his sinewy arms and legs, tearing his once-white shift. They and many others shouted warnings, prayers or just shouted mindlessly, afraid. Their voices crashed into each other so that only their fear was communicated, spreading like wildfire.

Arvo stepped confidently into the madman's path. His hand lashed out like a python. There was a crack of bone and the madman was abruptly silenced. He collapsed to the floor, his eyes rolling back into his head – and the fear subsided, though the crash of voices did not.

Overseers in the chapel were only beginning to react to the disturbance, pushing through a newly energised crowd. The madman, though certainly dead, was punched and kicked and spat on.

Everyone was keen to offer their version of events. Zanne made out some of the details therein: '—shirking his duties—', '—more than his share of water—', '—muttered something that sounded like—', '—only mouthing the words of the prayer—', '—hiding something on his shoulder, like a tattoo or—'

Arvo shrank from the centre of attention, reappearing at Zanne's side. No one appeared to notice him, for all he had just done for them. His part had been played in the blink of an eye and he retreated back into anonymity.

The overseers swiftly concluded their investigations. They didn't bother to inspect the madman's body, but picked out two labourers at random and instructed them to dispose of it. Funeral pyres had been burning across the city for weeks. This was just a little more fuel for the closest of them.

'How did you know?' Zanne asked Arvo. 'How did you know what to do?'

'Decisive action was required,' he stated flatly.

'Yes, but *how did you know* – that what they were saying about that man was true? Did you hear or see something or...?' Zanne turned to her newfound friend and saw the truth in his dull, grey eyes. Her voice tailed off.

'Decisive action was required,' he said.

‘I understand,’ Zanne told him.

It was half an hour later and most of the lumen units had been shut off. Tired refugees hunkered down on the cold tiles, wrapped in their threadbare blankets. Some of them, exhausted by the day’s travails and needing to replenish their strength for tomorrow’s, were already snoring.

‘I’ve been thinking about it,’ said Zanne, keeping her voice low in deference to the slumbering mounds around her, ‘and I really do. I understand.’

Arvo grunted. He had poured his water ration into his bowl and was bathing his head wound with it. Once he was done, he put the bowl to his lips and drained it.

‘You saw how everyone was starting to panic and you had to do something to stop it. If you hadn’t, things could’ve been much worse. People could have been trampled and... that man probably did something to deserve it, anyway.’

One life for many more; it seemed a reasonable equation, at least to those who knew how capricious death – and the will of the Emperor – could be.

‘They’re saying that a group of cultists hid in the shelter in Sector Eta-Two-something,’ Zanne whispered. ‘During the night they took out their knives and they went around slitting the throats of–’

Arvo placed a hand on Zanne’s. ‘Fetch your blanket,’ he said gruffly. Crowded though the chapel was, there was some space around him. No one wanted to get too close.

The girl’s face lit up. She hurried off to do as she was told. By the time she returned, Arvo was asleep.

In his dream he was on the ground; paralysed, helpless, as soldiers in skull masks were being blasted to pieces around him. He knew he shouldn’t care. For every one that died two more appeared to replace him, there was no stopping them – yet somehow, in the garbled world of the dream, every skull-masked soldier was him.

The dream disturbed him, yet oddly it brought him comfort too. When the waking bells wrenched him back to consciousness and he remembered where he was, a knot tightened in the pit of his stomach.

The dream, at least, had been of a familiar world. He had known his place there, known his duty and there had been others, many millions of others, like him. In the waking world, this world at peace, Arvo found himself lost.

Overseers were on the move, encouraging the slow-to-rouse. Arvo located Zanne and nudged her with his toe, sparing her the lash. ‘Stay close to me today,’ he whispered. He could already hear the clatters of ladles, depositing grey slop in tin bowls. He couldn’t tarry if he wished to eat. There was rarely enough for everyone.

Artificial hive light streamed through the broken windows, catching shards of coloured glass and diffusing into rainbows. Another day stretched out ahead of Arvo. Another long, hard workday. It wasn’t the work that made him feel weary, however.

Arvo was wearied by the effort of pretending to be an ordinary Imperial citizen – when he hardly knew what that meant.

‘Attention, all citizens.’

The voice blared out from vox speakers across the sector. Everyone was expected to heed its words without pausing in their labours.

It occurred to Zanne that, after all the devastation, the speakers had been the first things restored, which was only right of course. Communication was vital and the morning bulletins delivered good news to lift the spirits. Today, for example, there had been a great victory on Orath, as the Emperor’s Angels descended from the skies to cleanse that world of pestilence.

There was also a warning about diehard cultist cells in hiding across Hive Opus. *‘A spy was uncovered*

in a refuge only last night, scheming to sabotage our reconstruction efforts. It was by the Emperor's grace and through the vigilance of ordinary citizens such as yourselves that his vile plot was foiled.'

Zanne had no shovel today, having been late in line for tools. She had to dig with her hands, which was no excuse for slacking. Private Renne was overseeing. He was a little more mindful of Zanne's young age than most. He let her take water to the other labourers, so they could drink without leaving their posts.

She found Arvo kneeling, cradling something in his lap. He had laid down his axe. Zanne crouched beside him, concerned that he might be hurt, and saw what he was holding. It was a mask; a gas mask with a hole for a rebreather tube. One of its round eyepieces had been shattered and the cloth was stiff with dried blood.

Arvo had half uncovered a fallen man. Zanne had noticed the body, but paid it no heed – it was just one of many, very many. It seemed to have affected her friend, however.

The dead man's right eye was a mess. Zanne recognised a bullet wound by now, and knew it would have been instantly fatal. Arvo must have peeled the gas mask from the corpse. What was it about this one in particular that had made his eyes glaze over?

'Did you know him?' she asked.

Arvo hesitated. 'In a way,' he confessed.

'He isn't wearing anything.'

'The quartermasters must have reached him before he was buried.'

She frowned at the unfamiliar word. 'Quartermasters?'

'They salvaged his weapon, his armour, his equipment.' Arvo turned the mask over in his hands. 'They only left this behind because it is broken beyond repair. It served its purpose and is useless to them now. Just like its owner.'

'Who was he?' asked Zanne.

'One of our liberators.'

'The Astra Militarum?' Zanne had thought she'd never seen an Imperial Guardsman before. She now realised that she had seen plenty in recent days. She had just never seen one alive. Much had been rumoured about the implacable, faceless soldiers of the Death Korps of Krieg. Bereft of their fearsome armour they looked like anyone else, any casualty of war.

Why did Orath merit Angels when Parius had to make do with ordinary men?

'Praise the Emperor for their sacrifice,' she mimicked the morning bulletins.

'They are bred to fight and to die for Him,' Arvo murmured. 'They believe their lives are worth less than other lives. This man had nothing but his duty. He was glad to take a bullet in the eye, so that we could... We could...'

'We could be free,' said Zanne.

'Yes,' said Arvo dully. 'So we could be free.'

They had rested too long. A whip servitor sprang up behind them, the muscles in its overdeveloped shoulders cording. The lash that replaced its right arm struck at Arvo's back, crackling with a mild electric charge for good measure.

Arvo accepted his punishment with hardly a wince. He dropped the blood-encrusted mask and retook his pickaxe. Only Zanne heard the bitter words he muttered to himself as he resumed his toil, with redoubled efforts: 'So we could be free.'

They achieved a breakthrough later that afternoon.

The labourers cleared a way into a storage cellar. Private Renne shone a luminator down there and announced that it appeared intact. He sent a dozen labourers down into the darkness at once. Zanne would

gladly have been one of them and was small enough to fit. Arvo held her back with a shake of his head.

For the next few hours, bulging grain sacks were hauled up from the cellar, passed along a line of workers, loaded into waiting trucks. One boy was whipped insensate when a sack tore in his arms, disgorging its load. Zanne was among those who had to kneel and claw back what they could from the dirt.

They worked an extra hour, so flushed was Renne with their success.

By the end of it, the cellar was almost picked clean. Then, a woman in the entranceway lost her footing with a full sack in her hands. Her flailing hand snatched at a creaking, groaning rafter for support – and the whole world shifted.

A terrible roar pierced Zanne's ears. She thought they might be bleeding. She found herself hugging the ground, choking on black dust, blinded by tears. She came to realise only gradually that the shaking had stopped. As her eardrums cleared, she heard coughs and splutters, wails of pain and cracked, feeble cries for help.

Zanne's first thought was to get back to work before a servitor saw her. She made it to her knees before doubling over, hacking up dust and bile. There were bodies strewn about her. Some were twitching, some ominously still. Others struggled to escape from beneath fresh mounds of wreckage.

'It's all right,' she heard a familiar voice in her ear. A strong arm encircled her shoulders. 'It's over. You're safe.' Arvo had produced a beaker of water from somewhere – probably his own ration. She accepted it gratefully.

'All those p-people,' Zanne stammered, trembling with shock.

Arvo shook his head. 'We can do nothing for them.'

'You stopped me going down there. You knew the cellar was unsafe. You could have... Why didn't you say something?'

'The overseers saw what I saw,' Arvo assured her. 'They knew what I knew. It is not for us to question their decisions.'

The weary trudge back to the shelter that night was made under a heavier pall of silence than usual. As the workers filed through the chapel doors, Private Renne joined a small group of his comrades outside. He boasted to them about his successful day, about the amount of food he had recovered.

Inside the chapel, there was no sign of extra food, just fewer mouths to eat it. What little gruel remained was lukewarm, starting to congeal. Zanne was too tired to feel hungry anyway. She went straight to bed. Despite her gang's extended shift today, work would resume exactly on schedule tomorrow.

'I heard something today,' said Zanne. 'From someone at the refuge. His labour gang found another soldier, a Death Korps of Krieg-er. Alive.'

Arvo shook his head. 'No.'

'Why not?' protested Zanne, although she had in fact been lying.

'The quartermasters count every Korpsman back into the dropships.'

'But what if--?'

'Only the dead are left behind – or the missing, presumed dead.'

'Yes, but what if one of the--?'

'A survivor would make himself known to the planetary authorities and arrange return to his company as soon as possible, else be a deserter.'

They were tramping through the streets of the hive. Their gang was being herded to its new assignment, which was further away than the old one. This gave them half an hour's respite each morning before the real work started. Zanne liked that the overseers tolerated some talking, as long as their charges walked.

‘What would happen, then?’ she asked. ‘To a deserter?’

He didn’t answer. Zanne studied his face for a clue to what he was thinking, but found none. ‘You said,’ she prompted him, ‘that the Krieg-ers were *bred*. To be soldiers?’

‘For a Korpsman to disobey orders,’ Arvo murmured, so she had to strain to hear him, ‘it is unknown, inconceivable. His conditioning... Unless...’

‘Unless what?’

‘Unless the Korpsman himself was... deficient. Or touched by Chaos.’

At the sound of the word, Zanne made the protective sign of the aquila across her chest. ‘They must be frightened, sometimes, even soldiers.’

‘We are taught not to question. We are taught that the Emperor has all the answers, even when we are blind to them. We are taught that to think forbidden thoughts is a sign of insanity, but how... How can we know for sure?’

‘If I had to be shot at and blown up every day and had to face all kinds of monsters, I think I’d be frightened.’

‘Not frightened,’ Arvo muttered. ‘Never frightened.’

He wouldn’t be drawn further on the subject.

He didn’t speak again until later that afternoon. They were clearing the site of a demolished hab-block, to allow a new one to be erected. They had overfilled a waste disposal cart, which Arvo had to wheel to the incinerators. Zanne went along, a volunteer, to steady his load and to shovel up the debris that sloughed from it.

‘What will you do?’ Arvo asked her unexpectedly.

She frowned. ‘When? What do you mean?’

‘Once the reconstruction is complete. What did you do before?’

Zanne laughed at him. ‘There was no “before.”’ Seeing Arvo’s brow furrow, she tried to explain. ‘There is always rebuilding to do. We build, the traitors and the monsters come along and knock everything down, and we have to build again.’

‘Then this, the labour gangs, this is all there is?’

They were standing at the furnace mouth. Its breath seared the side of Zanne’s face and cast her friend in a fiery orange glow. ‘We serve the Emperor if we build faster than our enemies destroy.’ She was reciting old words again, words she had learned in her schola. ‘When we build more than we need on Parius, we can send metal and chemicals to the Emperor’s forges and men to fight for Him.’

‘Then what...?’ Arvo thought better of the question and stifled it.

He turned away, applying himself to the emptying of the cart. Zanne had to prompt him twice before he looked at her again.

‘What are those men fighting for?’ he asked in a deathly whisper.

His eyes demanded an answer, but she had none to give. Instead, to fill the uncomfortable silence, Zanne blurted out, ‘I knew him. He was our neighbour, back in the old hab-block. He used to come around and fix our lumoglobes when they... I thought I should tell you, that’s all.’

Arvo didn’t move, didn’t speak. Zanne wondered if she had made a terrible mistake. There was no taking back the words, however. Not now she had finally released them. She couldn’t bottle her secret up again.

‘I knew the real Arvo,’ she confessed.

Arvo returned to the shelter that night to find Zanne’s blanket gone.

She had moved it as far away from him as she could. She avoided him at work too, though he kept an eye

on her as much as possible. Only three days later did he find – and take – a chance to speak to her again.

Zanne looked tired. She had been lashed three times already. She was beginning to sag again, and whip servitors were circling. Arvo took water over to her. Zanne smiled weakly through the sheen of dirt that covered her round face. She was shivering. He felt her forehead. It was hot and his hand came away damp.

She let him help her dig, until the servitors turned their gazes elsewhere.

‘He was dead when I found him,’ he muttered to her. ‘I did not kill him.’

Zanne gaped at him. ‘Of course not. I never thought–’

He knew now why she alone had talked to him, why she had been so curious. He owed her an explanation. For three days, he had striven to formulate one.

‘I woke and I was alone,’ he began, interrupting her. ‘I found his body, Arvo’s body, and I... It may have been the blow to my head, but... I wondered why his life, your lives, were worth more than our lives. I wondered what you had that was so precious, worth the sacrifice of so many of my brothers.’

‘You thought too many questions.’

Arvo nodded. ‘Yes. I did. I wanted to understand.’

‘I...’ began Zanne. She swallowed, averting her eyes from him. ‘I have questions sometimes, too. Just in my mind, but...’

‘Go on,’ he said.

‘Sometimes, in the block, I’d hear people saying, “why can’t we have more food and longer rest hours?” I should have reported them as traitors, but I didn’t. I knew they had alcohol. They were making it on the thirty-fourth floor. Then there was graffiti in the stairwells and the next thing anyone knew–’

‘Everything fell apart,’ muttered Arvo.

‘So, do you?’ asked Zanne with disarming directness. ‘Do you understand?’

Arvo’s brow creased. He took a breath.

A sudden eruption of noise forestalled him. Familiar noise, the soundtrack of his old life. At first he thought it was in his head, another memory. Gunfire and voices raised in anger, fear and pain – and explosions. He could see from Zanne’s face that she heard it too. In the distance, but rapidly approaching: the sound of war.

Arvo reached by reflex for a gun that wasn’t there. He clung to the haft of his pickaxe instead, rising from his crouch.

Most of the overseers had also drawn weapons and were headed towards the disturbance. Their leader, Corporal Maxtell, remained. ‘Ignore it,’ he barked at his nervous labourers, spraying spittle. ‘Whatever is happening is no business of yours and no excuse for shirking. This gang will meet its end-of-shift quotas or I’ll take the difference out of your hides!’

‘Sir, I can help,’ Arvo spoke up. ‘I–’

He felt Zanne’s elbow in his ribs and bit his tongue. She was right. It would be unwise to reveal his secret. A glowering servitor was pushing its way towards him. He did as he was told and returned to work – though not for long.

The war with all its noise and fury crashed into them.

It began with a single running figure, spitting profanities over his shoulder. A black-and-purple cultist’s cloak was slung over his grey labourer’s coveralls. Maxtell fired. He missed, but a lasgun beam from behind blew out the traitor’s knee. He fell in a spray of bone fragments and blood to lie in gasping, twitching agony.

The corporal bowed to the inevitable, yelling to his gang to retreat but keep hold of their tools. Arvo kept a tight grip on his axe. More cultists burst onto the scene, and he stepped to greet them. Not expecting

resistance from a simple labourer, they ran into his bludgeoning attack.

They were everywhere, suddenly, stinking shadows emerging from the half-light, seeking human shields to hide behind. One made a grab for Zanne and earned Arvo's pick through his skull.

Muzzles flashed. Arvo saw Maxtell cut down as he dived for cover. He pulled Zanne down behind a half-demolished wall. One of the gang's lumen units was shot out, followed swiftly by the other.

Parius Interior Guard troops, including some of Arvo's overseers, were hard on the cultists' heels. Their lasgun and luminator beams criss-crossed in the darkness. Voices yelled to the labourers to flatten themselves on their stomachs, but many were held captive or just too panicked to comply. The soldiers, having given fair warning, were not reticent about shooting any shadow that moved.

Zanne had curled into a trembling ball. 'There are only a few of them,' Arvo whispered to her reassuringly. 'A dozen, at most. This is not a planned attack. They have been smoked out of some bolthole and are on the defensive.'

They're doing as much damage as they can, he could have added but chose not to, *one last howl of rage before they die.* He recalled what Zanne had said: *We build, the traitors and the monsters come along and knock everything down, and we have to build again.*

'Stay down.'

Arvo knew his surroundings. By instinct, he had committed every detail of them to memory. He also knew where each cultist had been when the lights went out. He edged out from behind the half-wall, keeping low to reduce the risk of friendly fire. Some of the cultists could be pinpointed by their gibbering and shrieking. They were sending entreaties to their vile deity. Arvo strained to block out the actual words. Words could be dangerous.

He came up behind a likely shadow. He slipped his axe haft around its throat and strangled him with it. The cultist had no time to squeal. The fight left his limbs and he dropped. Arvo was already seeking out his next target.

A knot of figures crouched behind a barricade of promethium barrels – empty, thank the Emperor. They had two guns between them. Their wielder's faces, twisted by insanity, lit up with each shot taken. In those flashes, Arvo identified two other figures as cultists, four more as cringing hostages.

Stealing up to the group, he interposed himself among them. Only one cultist saw him, shooting him a suspicious glare. Arvo dropped his gaze as if cowed; just one more hostage. The cultist, he saw, was not quite as unarmed as he had appeared to be. He was wearing a belt hung with grey metal eggs, at least four of them. Krak grenades.

He was muttering to himself, as if building his resolve. *One last howl of rage before they die.* In these urban surroundings, with so many innocents, he would cause devastation. Arvo had no choice. He lunged at the bomber, driving a fist into his stomach. It took two more punches to extinguish the fervour in his eyes. By then, his fellow decadents were alert to the enemy among them.

Arvo snatched a grenade and rounded on them. They weren't quite ready to die yet, after all. They shrank from him, for a second, long enough for him to tackle the closest of them. He wrenched the cultist around into another's sights as he fired. The cultist stiffened in Arvo's arms and he threw the body into the others, at the same time wrenching the lasgun from its deathly grip.

The gun was local issue, lighter than Arvo was accustomed to. It felt good to hold it, all the same; like an extension of his self. His hands had felt empty for too long. He gunned down the remaining two cultists, unskilled combatants, with ease. Another ran up behind him, betraying his approach with a fanatical roar, and he spun – not fast enough to bring his gun to bear, but in time to snap his attacker's jaw with its butt, driving bone through muscle.

A wave of concussive force blew him over. Arvo heard the explosion a fraction of a second later. He

stayed down as flaming debris rained upon him. *Another bomber!* The blast had come from – he couldn't get his bearings – his right. Where he had left Zanne.

He rolled to put out any flames before they took hold. Smoke was smothering his oxygen, making him miss his gas mask, blinding him further – but concealing him too. A cultist, with his back to Arvo, strafed the shadows with a lasgun indiscriminately. Arvo, in contrast, squeezed his trigger only once, punching through his target's head.

Sensing movement to his left, he snapped his gun around. An Interior Guard trooper had him in his sights. *Nice work*, thought Arvo. He lowered his weapon and gestured to show he was an ally. The soldier held his fire. He motioned to Arvo to get down on the ground anyway. Arvo complied. 'Thank you for your service, citizen,' the soldier grunted as he took the lasgun from beside him. 'We'll take it from here.'

Arvo waited, but seethed impatiently.

There couldn't have been many cultists standing. He had downed at least half of them himself, while the bombing had surely taken out more. Still, long minutes passed – interspersed with brief but violent outbreaks of shouting, scuffling and gunshots – before calm was restored. Then a lumen unit had to be found and kicked into sputtering action. Interior Guard troopers swept the area, prodding at every prostrate body, alive or dead, in search of enemies in hiding.

At last, the survivors, the innocent labourers in Arvo's gang, were given leave to stand. Doubtless next would come the order to return to work, as soon as Maxtell's replacement was established. In the meantime, they had a precious moment to process what had happened, deal with their shock and count their dead.

Some attacked their tormentors' bodies, hacking them with blunt tools or tearing them apart with bare hands. It was a pointless kind of revenge, other than to vent their misery and frustration. Nobody tried to stop them. Arvo made straight for the wall behind which he had left Zanne.

The wall had been sundered in the explosion.

Zanne's pale hand protruded from the debris as if she had fought her fate. As if she had tried to claw her way to freedom before the breath was crushed out of her. He took the hand between his own. It was cold. He had seen so many deaths in his short life, he told himself, so very many. Why did this one feel different?

Why was her life worth more than other lives?

So, do you? He recalled the very last thing Zanne had said to him. *Do you understand?* Her last question. Arvo answered her aloud, as if there was a chance she might hear him. 'Yes,' he whispered. 'I understand now.'

The sky was split by the shrieks of Imperial engines.

Sergeant Jarvan looked up, shielding his eyes, as the first ships hit Parius' atmosphere, blazing gloriously. He shifted his gaze to the vast, straight lines of humanity stretched across the newly cleared assembly terrace on Hive Opus' upper tier, and his chest swelled with pride.

He almost wished he was travelling to the stars with them. Almost.

Of course, their departure would leave the labour gangs shorthanded, but this couldn't be helped. Parius Monumentus' tithe to the Imperium was due and no allowance could be made for recent losses. The labourers who remained would just have to work harder, until their population was replenished.

Jarvan hadn't witnessed the tithing ceremony before. He had just been promoted – for the second time in less than four months – after his predecessor was killed in a bombing attack. He strode along the endless ranks of young men, pausing to question some. He asked their names and how they felt about being chosen to fight for the Emperor, to which all but one professed to being suitably honoured.

That one gave his name as Arvo. The name, along with his pale, dull-eyed face, almost sparked a flicker of recognition in Jarvan. ‘Begging your pardon, sergeant,’ said the new recruit, ‘but I was chosen to fight a long time ago.’

Jarvan checked Arvo’s name on his data-slate. ‘So I see. The last draft overlooked you, so this time you volunteered for service. You achieved the highest scores of your intake in your selection tests – the best scores I have ever seen, in fact.’

‘I know my life’s purpose now,’ said Arvo.

Jarvan raised an eyebrow. ‘Pray tell?’

‘I was bred to fight and to die for Him.’

‘An admirable attitude.’

‘I shall face the Emperor’s enemies, therefore, without fear or doubt. I shall exchange this life He has granted me for the greatest possible advantage to Him. If I can only advance His cause in the slightest, then I shall consider my brief existence worthwhile. I shall do my duty – for what else is there, after all?’

‘What indeed?’ Jarvan smiled approvingly. He clasped his hands behind his back and moved on.

The first of the dropships was coming in to land, to gather up its complement of soon-to-be-martyrs. Jarvan had forgotten most of their names already, but he would remember one name for a time, at least – along with the question he had posed. The sergeant repeated it to himself in a thoughtful mutter.

‘Yes. What else is there, indeed?’

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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.

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