

WARHAMMER
40,000



AN ASTRA MILITARUM SHORT STORY

NO HERO

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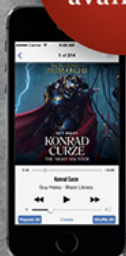
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NO HERO

Peter McLean

On distant Vardan IV, the brave men and women of the Astra Militarum have successfully commenced their strategic redeployment. Our glorious Imperial Navy are even now lifting troops and noteworthy civilians for transit to new fronts, where fresh opportunities to serve the glory of the Imperium await them! The redeployment from Vardan IV is a major victory for mankind!

The Emperor protects!

– From the Imperial newsreel archives
of the Officio Prefectus

The withdrawal is underway at last. The greenskin menace is unstoppable, and I can only praise the Emperor's name that the warmaster has finally seen sense and signalled a full retreat.

I have lost two million men on Vardan IV.

– From the field notes of Lord General
Militant Leopold D'Vangion

Holy God Emperor, I beseech you, deliver us from this terrible place.

– Colonel Noriego, Reslian 45th

I don't know if anyone will ever read this journal, but I'm going to start writing it anyway. There's nothing else to do, other than sit in my tent and sweat and wait for it to be over. It's that or listen to Corporal Cully and Sergeant Rachain make fun of people, but after six months in D Company I'm tired of the pair of them. They're fine soldiers but their sense of humour revolves around making up cruel names for everyone, and I don't like it. At least they're not in my platoon – that's something, I suppose.

It's so hot in the tent that I'm feeling faint even as I write, this despite the rain drumming down. The air itself is like liquid, the humidity making my combat fatigues stick to me in the most disgusting way. There hasn't been a single day in the last six months when it hasn't been like this, and the nights are no better. Our advance firebase is deep in the jungle, hundreds of miles away from the landing fields where even now the massive transports are evacuating whole regiments up to the orbiting troop ships.

Praise the Emperor, we're getting out of this hell.

The first wave of Valkyries came an hour ago and took C Company away with them, heading for those blessed landing fields. It'll be our turn soon, thank the Golden Throne. The rampaging horde of orks is less than twenty miles away from our camp now, so the scouts have reported, and there are vast numbers of them.

Vast. Too many to fight any more. The firebase will be overrun.

The order to evacuate Vardan IV came at the very last moment, but I'm just thankful that it came at all. I'm praying that our Valkyrie gets here before the greenskins do. I cannot wait to get in that carrier, and if I never see another ork again in my life it will be too soon.

I'm still alive. Somehow, dear journal, I survived it. This is what happened:

Our turn finally came to board the Valkyries. I was with Corporal Rikkards and the rest of One Section. The sergeant was with Two Section in the craft after ours. The lieutenant had already gone, no surprises there.

I clambered on board with Jannek ahead of me and Straub behind lugging his vox-caster, all of us jostling for position even though we knew there would be room for everyone. There were only ten of us in the section including the corporal, and the Valkyrie swallowed us and our gear with ease. Not in comfort, admittedly, but I wasn't complaining. No one was.

Karrel and Varus pulled the hinged benches down on their scissor mounts and we all promptly took our helmets off and put them on the benches to sit on. We had to fly over the rapidly approaching orks to get to the landing fields, and one thing we had learned very quickly on Vardan IV is that greenskins like to shoot at anything that moves, including Valkyries. Once you've seen your first man hit from below by a spray of bullets coming up through the floor between his legs, you learn to sit on your helmet when you're flying over the jungle.

'Shove up,' Cialella said as she lumped down next to me.

I grunted and moved a bit, but not much. I couldn't really, with Lopata looming on my other side. He was a ridiculously big man – Cully had called him 'ogryn', but not where Lopata was likely to hear and make something of it. Even Cully was wary of Lopata.

'Shove *up*,' Cialella complained.

'I'll shove it up yours in a minute,' I snapped at her, and Corporal Rikkards glared at us both.

'Be quiet, the pair of you,' he said.

I muttered an apology. It was like an oven in the idling Valkyrie, and everyone was short-tempered, and scared that the greenskins were going to charge into the camp shooting at any minute, and utterly overwhelmed with relief to be leaving alive, all at once. Brendahl was the last one in, and then the Navy gunner slammed the side door of the Valkyrie closed behind him and took up position behind his door-mounted heavy bolter. Varus mopped her face with a greasy rag, making it even dirtier than it had been. Blashak, by far the oldest of us at nearly thirty Terran-standard, coughed into his fist.

That was it, we really were getting out at last.

The Valkyrie's twin engines began to scream, and the heavy carrier shuddered as it lifted vertically off the ground in a swirling cloud of dust and wind-blown debris. I could just see out of the door-gunner's firing slit from where I was sitting, and I watched the thick foliage of the jungle canopy drop away beneath us as we lifted. We hovered for a moment while the pilot vectored the engines for horizontal flight, then sudden acceleration shoved me hard against Lopata's meaty shoulder. I don't think he even noticed.

We were still flying at a relatively low altitude, but the wind rushing in

through the gun ports in the doors was blissfully cool now that the aircraft had picked up speed, and everyone started to relax as the temperature in the crew bay dropped. I could hear distant gunfire over the noise of the engines as the greenskins wasted ammo trying to shoot us down, but we were high enough to be out of range of their small-arms fire.

‘Sorry I shoved you,’ Cialella said.

‘Forget it,’ I said, and smiled at her. ‘Sorry I snapped at you.’

Cialella was all right, and a crack shot too. She was the nearest thing One Section had to a proper sniper, even if she didn’t warrant a specialist marksman’s long-las. I sighed with sheer relief. This was the closest I had come to being comfortable and happy in over six months.

The feeling was wonderful, and it lasted right up until the missile hit us.

We must have been right over the orks, and they were already taking potshots at us, but we knew they couldn’t hurt us now. Only I guess whichever warband was directly below us just then had heavy weapons.

Bad luck, that was all it was. The pilots wouldn’t have known what hit them. I don’t know much about it myself, truth be told.

All I remember is that the front of the Valkyrie exploded in a shrieking fireball and then we were falling out of the sky, screaming as the wind tore through the crew bay.

I don’t know what happened after that.

I woke up with my head in Cialella’s lap, or what would have been her lap if she’d still had any legs.

She was very, very dead.

So was Straub, who was on top of me with a huge chunk of shattered metal sticking out of his forehead like a single, twisted horn. The floor of the crew bay was slanted at a crazy angle and the whole interior of the carrier was sticky with blood. I couldn’t move.

I could hear someone moving about, then the clang of an equipment locker swinging shut.

‘Help me,’ I croaked. ‘Who’s there? Please, help me.’

‘Sorry, boy, I thought you were dead too,’ Lopata’s voice said.

I saw his huge hairy hands reach down and hook Straub’s body under the armpits, then the big man hauled the corpse off me and tossed it unceremoniously aside.

‘I don’t know how I’m not,’ I said. ‘Is anyone else alive?’

‘Yeah, the corporal is, but he’s hurt, and Jannek is hurt far worse,’ Lopata said. ‘Varus and Blashak seem to be all right, and one of the Navy gunners made it too. Everyone else is paste.’

Seven of us had survived the crash, then. It didn’t seem possible.

‘It’s a miracle,’ I whispered. ‘The Emperor protects.’

Lopata shrugged and helped me to sit up.

‘Varus reckons we came down on top of the jungle canopy and sort of slid across the top of the trees for half a mile or so, and that slowed us down enough that we weren’t all pulped when the craft hit the ground. Pure luck, she says.’

‘Oh, how would she know?’ I muttered as I pulled myself the rest of the way up and tried to wipe as much of Cialella’s blood off my face as I could.

‘She looked at the trees – reckons she knows woodcraft and all that stuff,’ Lopata said. ‘She’s a scout, after all.’

‘Maybe,’ I said.

Varus had only been made up to scout two weeks ago after Darrup had been killed in an ork ambush, and in my opinion it had gone to her head. I took an unsteady step and the world spun around me, making me clutch at a broken piece of the Valkyrie’s twisted fuselage to hold myself up.

‘Steady there,’ Lopata said, grabbing my arm in a hand that went all the way around it with ease. ‘You must have taken a hell of a blow to the head – you’ve been unconscious for hours. It’s why I thought you didn’t make it.’

I grunted, just glad the other survivors hadn’t already been rescued before I woke up. I would have been left behind for dead, if that had happened. That made me frown as I thought about it.

‘Why haven’t we been picked up yet?’

Lopata just shrugged.

‘We’ve been written off as lost in action, the corporal says, and we’ve no way to tell anyone otherwise. The cockpit... well, isn’t there any more, so we’ve got no vox and no distress beacon. We were going to move out on foot once I’d finished scavenging kit.’

‘Oh,’ I said. ‘What about Straub’s field set?’

‘Some of it’s sticking out of his head, and the rest is smashed to bits,’

Lopata said.

‘Oh,’ I said again.

‘Reckon you can walk yet?’

I tried a tentative step towards the hole in the side of the aircraft where the crew bay door had been torn off. My vision was a bit blurry and my head was throbbing, but nothing seemed to be broken. I offered up a silent prayer of thanks to the Emperor for my deliverance.

‘Yeah,’ I said. ‘I’ll be all right. Thanks for pulling me out of there.’

I climbed carefully down out of the wreckage and into a steaming jungle clearing that was strewn with bits of the shattered Valkyrie. The jungle stank of rot and the promethium that was slowly dripping from the carrier’s ruptured fuel tanks. I could only thank the Emperor that we hadn’t all gone up in a fireball.

Corporal Rikkards was sitting on a fallen tree trunk, with the surviving Navy door-gunner not far away from him. Blashak was away by the edge of the treeline, and I could see Varus staring up at the canopy, as though still trying to work out how we were alive at all. Lopata followed me out of the wreckage with four lasguns in his arms.

‘Look who I found,’ he said, grinning.

Corporal Rikkards looked at me in surprise.

‘Thought you were dead, boy,’ he said.

He was nursing his left arm. Blashak, our squad medic, had bandaged it up for him, wrapping his left hand in a great ball of dressings that told me the wound must be pretty bad.

‘No, sir,’ I said.

‘I can see that now, boy,’ Rikkards said, and winced as he moved. ‘What did you get, Lopata?’

‘Four more lasguns,’ he said. ‘At least we can have one each now, and I’ve salvaged a fair bit of ammo too. And a Navy flare pistol, in case we can think of a use for it.’

‘Good,’ Rikkards said. ‘Stack them with the rations. We need to move out soon.’

‘You really don’t think anyone’s going to come looking for us, corporal?’ I asked.

‘No, I really don’t,’ Rikkards said. ‘You can see the state of the craft as well as I can – no one’s going to be expecting any survivors from that.’

I sighed. He was right. The front half of the Valkyrie had been obliterated. If it hadn't been for the Emperor's Grace and the thickness of the jungle canopy we would all be dead. As it was, it seemed our plummet from the sky and subsequent slide across the treetops had carried us well away from the orks. I couldn't hear any shooting in the distance, or anything at all except the hooting and screaming of the hideous simians and fierce avians that infested the jungle.

'Corporal,' Blashak called over to where Rikkards was sitting.

Blashak was hunkered down on his haunches in the shade of the trees, bent over the prone figure of Jannek, with a medi-kit open on the ground beside him.

'What?'

'Jannek isn't in a fit state to be moved,' Blashak said. 'This is way beyond anything I can do with field dressings. I don't think he's going to make it.'

Rikkards wiped his good hand over his face and looked away.

'No, I don't think he is either,' he said.

'Well, what are we going to do with him?'

'You *know* what we're going to do with him, Blashak,' the corporal said. 'We... Oh Throne, I've got the seniority, haven't I? Where's the lieutenant when you actually want him for once? I suppose I'll have to do it.'

He climbed off the tree trunk and walked over to where Jannek lay. Jannek was alive but only just, impaled through the gut by a long piece of the Valkyrie's broken airframe. His breathing was shallow and weak, and he was the colour of rancid milk.

Blashak looked up at the corporal and shook his head.

'There's nothing I can do,' he said again. 'I'm sorry. I tried, but...'

He gestured helplessly at the critically wounded man.

'I know.'

Corporal Rikkards bowed his head in prayer for a moment, and drew his laspistol.

'The Emperor's Mercy,' he said, and shot Jannek through the head.

'You can't do that!' the Navy door-gunner protested, leaping to his feet from where he had been sitting with his back to the fallen tree.

He looked down at Jannek for a moment, then took a step away from the corporal.

Rikkards shrugged.

‘Just did,’ he said. ‘And anyway, yes I can. You know the regulations as well as I do – if a man is wounded and can’t continue, if it would be a mercy to end his suffering or if his condition presents a clear and present danger to his comrades, the senior officer present is empowered to administer the Emperor’s Mercy.’

‘All the same...’ the gunner started.

Lopata put a huge hand on the Navy man’s shoulder. The gunner swallowed.

‘You don’t want to make a fuss about this, Navy boy,’ Lopata said quietly. ‘You survived the crash with us, so you’re one of us now. And we don’t make a fuss. Otherwise maybe you *didn’t* survive the crash, you understand me?’

The gunner nodded. He still looked a bit sick, but he had obviously taken the big man’s meaning. Regimental legend had it that Lopata had been some sort of big-time ganger back home, or at least an enforcer for someone who was. A man who broke people’s kneecaps for money, or worse. Right then I could well believe it.

‘The name’s Civatte,’ the Navy man said. ‘Gunner, second class.’

‘Welcome to the glorious Reslian Forty-Fifth,’ Rikkards said. ‘You’re in the army now, and I’m in charge. Right you lot, share out the gear and get ready to move. We’re getting to those landing fields and onto a transport even if we have to walk.’

We had to walk, all right. We walked for four days.

The heat was almost intolerable. The entire jungle steamed with humidity, and the stench of rotting vegetation filled the foetid air, half choking us. I cursed under my breath and wiped uselessly at the thick film of sweat that covered my unshaven face, dislodging a pale, translucent arachnid from my left ear. I hadn’t even felt it. In half-formed words I cursed the constant rain, cursed my waterlogged boots that felt like they were made of lead, and the straps of the heavy pack that bit into my shoulders through my sodden combat jacket. I cursed the ever-present biting insects that tried to settle on every inch of exposed skin. I could feel them trying to suck out the lifeblood that somehow kept me moving hour after hour through this living nightmare.

I dug my canteen out of my pack and took a pull on it, but the water was warm and brackish and metallic-tasting from the container. I grimaced, and made myself drink it anyway.

The Navy man, Civatte, was ahead of me, struggling with his pack and muttering pitifully to himself every step of the way. His fancy Navy boots had half rotted away in the often knee-deep mud and he was walking with a pronounced limp, favouring his left foot heavily. Neither the man nor his boots were built for marching, and it looked to me like he might not last too much longer.

Four days of forced marches in this terrible terrain and vile weather were hard enough on infantry troopers like us. For the Navy flyer, it must have been pure hell.

Varus was adamant that we were going the right way, but I didn't see how she could be so sure. So much of our kit had been destroyed in the crash that we were without even the most basic things that every infantry trooper takes for granted, like compasses and lamp packs. We could have been a hundred miles behind the ork lines by then without knowing it. All we could do was put our faith in the scout and pray to the Emperor for His guidance.

'It's getting late,' Varus said over her shoulder. 'We'd better start looking for somewhere to make camp before we lose the light.'

It got dark very quickly in the jungle, and the canopy overhead was so thick that no moonlight made it through after dark. Trying to move after sundown was impossible.

Corporal Rikkards grunted agreement, his face haggard and drawn. This was his first full command, and the strain of that and his wound was taking its toll on him. I had a nasty feeling the wound was infected, his hand starting to rot under the ball of now-filthy bandages. He hadn't said anything, but I could smell it sometimes. That worried me – Blashak was only a field medic orderly, not a proper doctor, and he didn't have the skill or equipment to perform a field amputation. Not one that the corporal would be likely to survive, anyway. None of the rest of us had any medical training at all.

Civatte fell forward suddenly, his foot snagged on a fine wire. The rest of us dived clear with a split second to spare before the clutch of grenades went off, blowing the Navy gunner into the air like a limp rag doll. He fell

heavily in a rain of mud and shrapnel, his body bloodied and broken.

‘Nobody move,’ Rikkards whispered hoarsely, raising his head a fraction of an inch from the thick mud in which he lay.

I eased off the safety of my lasgun, my eyes sweeping the dense undergrowth for any sign of movement. Rikkards was inching his way towards me on his stomach, his laspistol clutched in his good hand. Something jumped in the bushes behind the prone corporal and I squeezed off a short burst over his head, the stock of the weapon held tight to my shoulder. The superheated rounds tore through the undergrowth, shredding the fern-like plants into cellulose shrapnel. The small purple simian that had moved gave a final twitch and lay still, its dismembered corpse resembling a scale model of Civatte.

‘You’re getting twitchy, boy,’ Rikkards cautioned me sternly.

‘Sorry, sir,’ I said.

Varus got slowly to her feet and tried to wipe the coating of mud from her face. She was caked with it, wet and foul-smelling. We all were, now.

‘Keep your eyes open for any more wires,’ she warned, tucking a loose strand of dirty brown hair back under her helmet.

Rikkards nodded. ‘Let’s move,’ he said. ‘If there were any greenskins still around they’d have been on us by now. That booby trap could have been months old for all we know.’

I nodded and followed him as Varus took point again, Lopata at my side and Blashak on the six.

‘Where are we, corporal?’ Blashak complained, his eyes scanning the ground for more tripwires as he walked. ‘If we’re as far behind our lines as we’re supposed to be we should have run into *someone* by now.’

‘Think you could do better, Blashak?’ the corporal snapped. ‘You couldn’t track your way out of your own boot.’

Blashak shot him a filthy look and fell into sullen silence behind us. Dusk was settling in fast now, but at least the rain had finally stopped. Mist rose through the trees to cast a ghostly pallor over the jungle. Varus was leading us up an increasingly steep incline, winding through undergrowth thick enough for us to have to use our bayonets as machetes in several places.

She brought us to a halt a few minutes later with a silently raised hand, then turned to speak to the corporal in a low voice.

‘The trees are thinning out up ahead,’ she said. ‘Go carefully, we could step out into a ork camp any minute. There’s no telling how the front line’s altered by now.’

We moved silent as spectres, creeping through the trees to be confronted with a sight that brought us up short in our tracks. The heavy vegetation gave out suddenly a few feet from a cliff edge. Ahead of us, the ground dropped sharply away into a valley obscured by thick banks of drifting mist. On all sides the jungle continued into the dwindling distance, and only the Emperor and the orks knew what lay in the valley below.

‘Where are we?’ Blashak demanded, rounding on Varus with an angry look on his face.

She looked up him and shook her head.

‘I honestly have no idea,’ she admitted. ‘I’m sorry.’

Corporal Rikkards sank onto the ground and sat staring out across the misty valley as the light grew steadily worse, cradling his rotting hand in his lap. His face was blank and hopeless, drained of every feeling except pain. He had trusted in Varus as our only hope of making it to the landing fields – we all had – and now this. There was no way of knowing how long we had been walking in the wrong direction.

Blashak leaned his lasgun against a tree and stared at the scout.

‘We’re dead,’ he stated bluntly.

Varus nodded silently. ‘That’s a pretty accurate assessment of the situation, Trooper Blashak,’ she said. ‘We are dead, well and truly. We could’ve been heading the wrong way since we crashed for all I know. Some scout, aren’t I?’

She began to cry suddenly, just stood there weeping silently and looking out across the alien valley. I didn’t much like Varus, but right then I wanted to put my arms around her, just hold her and comfort her, but I didn’t dare. She would probably have knifed me if I had touched her. I sat down beside the corporal instead, and shared my last lho-stick with him while trying not to notice the smell of his hand. After a while Varus came and sat too, and we watched the darkness settle in.

‘We may as well stop here for the night,’ Rikkards said after a while, drowning the end of the stick in the mud.

‘We may as well all drop dead,’ Blashak snapped. ‘Stop prolonging the inevitable and get it over with.’

Lopata turned with a speed you wouldn't expect from such a big man, and punched Blashak in the face hard enough to knock him down.

'Shut up,' he growled. 'You just shut up, Blashak.' He stood over the fallen man with his huge hands balled into fists and a look of fury on his face. 'Varus did her best. What have you done, except complain?'

'Stow it, Lopata,' Rikkards said. 'It's not worth it. Let's make camp here and see if it looks any better in the morning.'

Of course it didn't look any better in the morning.

Dawn brought the first rain of the day, reeking and poisonous, and I woke from my exhausted sleep with my hand resting on the grip of my lasgun and the left side of my face pillowed on my mud-covered pack. It was hot already, and the rain steamed in the early morning light.

I lifted my head from the pack and sat up, looking around for the others. Varus was sitting on the ridge, staring out across the valley with her helmet off and her hair hanging around her face in a dirty matted curtain. Blashak and Lopata were making a point of ignoring each other. There was no sign of Rikkards.

'Where's the corporal?' I asked as I rummaged uselessly through my pack for something to eat. We had finished the last of our ration packs the previous day.

'Latrine,' Varus said, which meant he'd gone into the undergrowth somewhere to do his business.

We had all been too tired and depressed the previous night for anyone to feel like digging a regulation latrine pit. I got up and went over to where she sat.

'Got anything to eat?' I asked her.

'These are edible,' she said, and passed me a handful of small, wizened fruits with diseased-looking greyish skin.

I popped a few into my mouth and chewed, wincing at the bitter taste.

'Are you sure?'

'I didn't say they were good,' she admitted. 'Nothing here is, is it?'

I was trying to think of some words to say to her when there was a sudden yell from somewhere in the undergrowth about fifty feet away from the camp, the corporal's voice, followed by the crack of a laspistol.

'Orks!' he bellowed.

We grabbed our weapons and threw ourselves into cover in the heavy vegetation, trying to make out shapes in the impenetrable green and the steaming rain. The corporal's laspistol fired again, twice, then fell silent.

Something moved in the trees, something big.

Really big.

In the *Imperial Infantryman's Uplifting Primer* there is a section called 'Patrols & Ambushing' that details the correct use of the bayonet to make silent kills. There's an illustration there, and I remember it very clearly, that shows a proud Imperial Guardsman bayonetting an ork. The ork is about four feet tall and pot-bellied, and rather comical-looking.

Orks are not four feet tall, or pot-bellied, or even remotely funny.

The smallest ork warrior I have ever seen was eight feet tall and four hundred pounds of lean, murderous muscle. Some are much bigger than that.

Orks are terrifying.

I squeezed off a short burst but missed, the pouring rain spoiling my aim. I tried to line up on the place I had seen movement again, cursing the appalling conditions. Just then something burst up out of the undergrowth right in front of me, something huge and green and reeking.

The ork towered over me. Nine feet of pure hate with a massive, jagged axe in its fist. It was so close to me that the muzzle of my lasgun was almost touching its stomach. Its foul breath washed over me from its gaping mouth, two yellow, broken tusks jutting up from its enormously protruding lower jaw. I froze, but the Emperor moved me just enough to make my trigger finger clamp down in sheer panic.

I must have emptied half of my lasgun's power pack into the ork on full auto, at point-blank range.

It exploded, covering me in foul ichor and chunks of sizzling burned meat. I fell to my knees, retching and gasping in horror and relief. I could hear shooting from my right, Blashak shouting obscenities as he fired. I dropped and crawled that way, cradling my lasgun, and came up on the medic's flank.

'I only clipped it,' he hissed. 'Keep your head down.'

'Where?'

'Three o'clock – or it was, anyway.'

I nodded and readied my weapon. Visibility was down to about ten yards

in the pounding rain, but a fully grown ork is hard to miss. I spotted it, creeping through the undergrowth and hefting what I can only describe as a home-made heavy stubber. The weapon was boxy and ugly, badly welded together from what looked like scrap metal, and, inexplicably, spray-painted bright red. There was a huge drum-pattern magazine attached to it, though, and I had no doubt that it worked. I raised my lasgun just as the ork saw us.

It opened up immediately and tried to aim afterwards, giving Blashak and I time to flatten ourselves to the filthy mud underfoot. The noise of the ork weapon was deafening, and it bucked and kicked like a live thing even in the xenos brute's massive hands. Heavy-calibre explosive shells screamed over our heads and cut down a tree behind us as the stubber showered sparks furiously. Blashak returned fire as best he could from his prone position, but missed.

I noticed the ork already had a long las-burn across the meat of its left shoulder, where the medic had clipped it earlier, but the wound didn't seem to be slowing it down at all. The ork scurried into cover to reload, and I broke and ran in an attempt to outflank it, Blashak shooting to cover me as I went. I ducked behind the thick trunk of a huge tree just in time, as the ork's monstrous stubber started to roar again. I had the shot from there, and I put a tight burst into the beast's back.

Las-rounds tore through it, spinning it around with the stubber still firing. I threw myself down in panic as great chunks were blasted out of the tree I was hiding behind. The greenskin was hunched over and snarling, badly wounded but somehow still not dead. The toughness of orks is prodigious, but this was ridiculous.

Blashak started shooting again and earned himself a deafening return blast from the stubber for his troubles. Sparks flew from the massive weapon, which suddenly jammed with a horrible grinding noise. I seized the moment, sprang out of cover and blew the ork apart with a long burst of full auto.

I leaned against my tree for a long moment, gasping for breath.

'Clear,' I said at last, and Blashak stood up in a thicket of ferns.

'It's gone quiet,' he said, and I nodded.

The ork guns were so loud we would have heard any within a mile at least, and there was no las-fire anymore either. I took the opportunity to

slot a fresh power pack into my lasgun.

‘We need to regroup, find the others,’ I said.

We retraced our path through the undergrowth, listening. Blashak stopped, and put a hand on my arm to hold me.

‘I hear something,’ he said. ‘It’s coming from over there.’

I followed him to the edge of a small clearing, and there Lopata was facing down an ork in single combat. The ork had a broad-bladed, serrated knife clutched in its massive hand, and Lopata had his bayonet, his lasgun lost somewhere in the undergrowth. Lopata was so huge they looked almost evenly matched, and each snarled at the other as they circled. The ork roared and lunged, its knife plunging towards Lopata’s chest, but the big man wasn’t there any more.

He spun with the trained skill of a knife fighter and jammed aside the ork’s forearm with his own, blocking the stabbing thrust, and at the same time his other hand came down and plunged his bayonet into the meat of the creature’s muscular shoulder. The ork bellowed in rage and backhanded Lopata across the side of the head, knocking him down into the reeking mud. I raised my lasgun.

‘No!’ Lopata shouted.

He was on his feet again now, circling once more, and the look of savage joy in his eyes told me that he would be very unhappy with me if I shot the ork. He had something to prove here, I could tell, to the ork or to himself or maybe to the whole galaxy.

‘Come here,’ he hissed. ‘Come here, you ugly pig.’

I glanced across the clearing and saw Varus standing there watching too, her weapon lowered. There was no more shooting coming from anywhere, so this had to be the last of them. Lopata was going one-to-one with an ork with blades, and that was something to see. That was something special.

‘Go on, big lad!’ Blashak yelled, grinning as though the previous night’s altercation between him and Lopata had never happened.

To see a human fight an ork on its own terms was inspiring, stuff to stir the blood. The ork feinted with its heavy knife then slashed back the other way with astonishing speed, and opened a long, red cut in Lopata’s left arm. The big man hissed and kicked out hard enough to take the door off a Chimera, buckling the ork’s knee.

‘Lo-pa-ta! Lo-pa-ta!’ I started to chant, and the others took it up until we

were shouting and clapping and stamping like the audience at a stadium fight back home.

The monster took a limping step, snarling with hatred. Lopata's arm was running red but he barely seemed aware of it. He laughed even as the blood dripped from his fingers.

'I'm playing to the home crowd here, piggy,' he taunted the ork.

The ork crouched and sprang at Lopata, but instead of rolling away Lopata surged into its leap with his bayonet up. The ork crashed into him but now it was screaming, and Lopata put both hands on the bayonet that was hilt-deep in its chest and heaved it downwards with all his might. The ork tore open from sternum to crotch, and great ropes of reeking purple intestines spilled out of it as it fell. Lopata fought his way to his feet and kicked the dying ork away from him with a smile of vicious, blood-drenched triumph.

'Now you can shoot it,' he told me.

I put a las-round through the thing's forehead, and it fell quiet.

Varus let out a long breath, then turned away and vomited into a stand of ferns. Blashak shook his head in amazement.

'Nicely done, mate,' he said.

Lopata just grinned, trying to get his breath back.

'Are we sure that's all of them?' I asked, after a moment.

Blashak nodded. 'There were only four of them – Varus got the other one. A scouting party, I reckon, though scouting what I don't know.'

I shrugged, then a thought struck me. 'Where's the corporal?'

Blashak looked at me. 'Yeah, about that,' he said, after a moment. 'There's bad ways to go, then there's an ork catching you with your trousers down. Literally.'

I swallowed. I couldn't think of anything worse, and I really didn't know what to say to that.

'Oh,' I said feebly.

That made us four, then.

'Now what do we do?' Varus asked. 'Who's in command?'

She had the seniority, as the only scout, but she had only been a scout for two weeks and she didn't seem very sure of herself any more.

'I am, of course,' Lopata said. He pointed at the butchered ork lying at his feet. 'Anyone want to argue about that?'

I sighed. That was how the greenskins settled things. The biggest and strongest one in any group was automatically in charge. If that sort of thinking was starting to seem reasonable then we had definitely been on Vardan IV too long, but we all nodded just the same. Lopata's blood was up and he was still holding his dripping bayonet, and I don't think any of us wanted to argue with him just then.

Blashak nodded and took the medi-kit out of his pack.

'All right, boss,' he said. 'Let me see to your arm, then you can tell us what we do now.'

Lopata thought about that while Blashak cleaned and dressed his wound and Varus retrieved his fallen lasgun for him, then he made his decision.

'Those orks were scouts, like you said, and they were coming this way. Scouting something. I don't know what, but I reckon we'll find it down in that valley. That's the way we'll go, find what they were looking for and see if it's anything we can use.'

'Yes, boss,' Blashak said, and nodded.

Varus had a look about her like she wanted to argue, but given that she still felt guilty about getting us lost in the first place I supposed she thought better of it. Personally, by then I would have followed anyone who seemed to have even a vague idea of what to do. I nodded as well.

'Right, boss,' I said.

We left Corporal Rikkards where he had fallen. An undignified end, I know, but there was nothing we could do about it now. Lopata led us to the edge of the cliff and we gradually wound our way down the perilous slope, using the heavy undergrowth to keep from sliding to the bottom on our backs. The rain was coming down in hot sheets by then, washing away the increasingly unstable footing, and in the end it was all we could do to get to the bottom in one piece as the deluge turned the slope underfoot into a shifting quagmire.

At last the rain stopped and the incline reduced to a manageable gradient, and we found ourselves in even denser jungle than before. We unsheathed our bayonets and slowly hacked a path forwards, cursing with every step as the alien flora tore at our clothes and skin. We had barely gone fifty yards when an impossible sight stopped us dead in our tracks.

A settlement.

The wall of foliage ended suddenly where it had been hacked away, the

stumps glistening wet after the pouring rain. People were moving around in the settlement, children running and playing in the muddy streets. Prefab buildings stood up on short stilts, their walls rotting and damp, and beyond them the watery sunlight glinted off small, cultivated paddy fields.

It was a settlement full of Imperial civilians.

‘What the...?’ Varus started.

‘I thought we evacuated all the civvies?’ I said.

‘Didn’t you hear the commissar?’ Blashak sneered. ‘The *noteworthy* civilians, he said. The Administratum, that means, and the folk with money. This lot...’

He tailed off, and just shrugged.

‘They’ve been abandoned,’ Lopata said. ‘Too deep into greenskin country to get out, maybe, or just overlooked in the panic. Either way, they’ve been left for dead just like we have. And there are orks coming this way.’

I watched the children playing.

‘No,’ I said. ‘No, they haven’t been abandoned. Not yet. We’re here.’

‘There’s four of us,’ Blashak pointed out.

‘That’s right, there’s four of us,’ I said, rounding on him in sudden anger. ‘Four of the indomitable Astra Militarum, with lasguns and grenades and plenty of ammo, and a man who killed an ork in single combat.’

‘I did that,’ Lopata said, nodding proudly to himself. ‘Me. I’m not scared of a few greenskins. We’ll look after them for a bit.’

I *was* scared of orks, and I doubted it would only be a few of them, but I nodded anyway. It was the right thing to do. The Emperor protects, and we were the Emperor’s instruments in that valley.

It was our duty.

‘So we stay, then?’ Varus asked.

‘We stay,’ Lopata said. ‘We’re not getting out anyway, now. I say we die well.’

He shouldered his lasgun and marched out of the foliage and into the settlement with the three of us behind him.

We slept in the largest of the prefabs that night, the one that belonged to the settlement’s head woman, taking it in turns to keep the watch. Varus had rigged the perimeter late that afternoon, using her scout training to set tripwires attached to frag grenades at each likely entry point. That left us

low on throwable ordnance, but we all agreed with her that it was the best course of action.

The colonists were keeping their children inside now, as much as they could anyway. The very young ones, the ones who were too young to understand why we were there, were excited to have real soldiers in their settlement. The others looked at us with the same wary fear as their parents.

It was obvious that this remote place had been untouched by the fighting until now, and the settlers knew that if we were there then the war couldn't be far behind us. No one mentioned the evacuation, and it soon became clear the settlers knew nothing about it. The place didn't even have a vox-station. We kept quiet rather than tell them how their own side had left them behind to die.

All the same, I thought they might be starting to suspect something along those lines. There were only four of us, and we were filthy and hungry and quite clearly cut off from our own forces. The head woman had been gracious, welcoming, even grateful to us, but I could see the quiet terror hiding behind her ancient grey eyes.

My chrono read four a.m. when Blashak shook me awake for my turn on watch.

'You're up,' he said, and went through to the back to grab some sleep while he could.

I took my lasgun and went and sat on the rickety wooden steps in front of the house. All the buildings in the settlement were standard-pattern prefabs but they had been raised up on thick wooden pilings to keep the water from coming in when the rains were heavy. Even that early in the day the humidity was already crushing and the jungle stank of rot and despair, but at least it wasn't raining yet. I checked my lasgun methodically, oiled the moving parts and picked muck out of the fixed sights with a cracked thumbnail, reciting the Litany of Durability over the precious weapon as I worked. It was nothing special in itself, just a mass-stamped M35 Short Pattern lasgun with a skeletal metal stock, but I knew it was the difference between life and death.

It says in the *Imperial Infantryman's Uplifting Primer* that the lasgun is the most precious item in a Guardsman's possession, and I truly believe it. It's not just a weapon, although of course it is that and a very good one too.

The lasgun, I firmly believe, is the mortal instrument of the Emperor's will. Every shot is a prayer to His eternal glory, every kill an affirmation of His divinity and the ultimate divinity of mankind. The lasgun is the very heart and soul of an Imperial Guardsman.

Satisfied at last, I leaned back against the damp wall behind me, watching the perimeter. It started to get light, and the jungle woke around me in a chorus of birdsong and the chattering of simians. It was strangely beautiful, as Vardan IV often was when the chaotic roar of war faded away. I smiled to myself as I watched the sun rise over the trees.

'What're you smiling about?' a woman's voice asked me.

I turned and looked down towards the muddy street, and saw a woman peering up at me. She had a jug of water from the communal well balanced on her hip, and a little boy of four or five years clinging to her skirts. His feet were bare, and splashed with mud.

'It's a nice morning,' I said, for want of anything better.

'Go back to the house, Rami,' the woman told her son, and she waited until he had trotted out of earshot before she spoke to me again. 'We're going to die, aren't we?' she said.

'I...' I started. Yes, they probably were. We all probably were, but I knew it wouldn't help anyone to tell her that. 'No, you're not,' I said at last.

'Why not?'

I patted my lasgun and smiled. 'We're the Astra Militarum.'

She snorted and turned away, obviously not impressed. Lopata might have impressed her, with his size and the sheer raw power of him, or maybe Varus with her stealth and cunning, or even Blashak with his age and experience, but not me. I'm nothing special, I have to admit, but I *am* a Guardsman.

'Hey,' I called after her, and she stopped and turned to look back at me. I realised I had no idea what to say to her. 'Stay inside today, if you can,' I managed after a moment. 'Keep your children indoors, at least.'

She just nodded, and went on her way.

I watched the sun rising through the morning mist, and thought about the children. Each of them just one amongst countless billions, utterly insignificant. Each one a pure, brilliant spark of life, precious to the Emperor if not to His Imperium.

It was maybe an hour later when the first of Varus' booby traps detonated. I dived off the steps into cover with my lasgun in my hands as a fireball blew out of the foliage fifty yards away, throwing chunks of ork into the mud at the edge of the settlement. I sighted and fired into the dense undergrowth, one, two, three closely grouped shots. My training sergeant would have been pleased with that grouping, although I doubt he would have said so. Something big grunted and fell over. Undergrowth rustled to my left, then there was a deafening roar as one of the orks' primitive stubbers opened up.

Massive bullets stitched their way across the muddy street in front of me, throwing up plumes of water and muck with each explosive impact. I rolled and sighted again, and squeezed off a short burst into the impenetrable wall of jungle. More las-shots cracked from my left flank and I realised the others had come out of the prefab through the back way and got into cover, and were now returning fire.

'Cover me!' Lopata yelled.

I opened up on full auto, spraying the foliage until it steamed. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Lopata rear up and hurl a grenade, his powerful arm sending it sailing into the jungle. It exploded with a roar, and silence fell.

'Clear,' Varus called after a count of twenty, and I slowly got to my feet with my lasgun still held warily in front of me.

Orks are huge and terrifying but they aren't particularly clever, and once they start shooting there's no stopping them. If there had been any left out there they would still have been blasting away at us.

'Varus, secure the perimeter,' Lopata ordered.

She ran doubled over, her lasgun ready at her hip, but the calm held. The scout disappeared into the undergrowth without a sound. I let out a long breath and lowered my weapon.

'Good shooting, boy,' Blashak said. 'Reckon you got one at least.'

I looked at the older man, trying to work out if he was mocking me or not. I shrugged.

'Thanks.'

He clapped me on the shoulder.

Lopata came out of cover with his lasgun over his shoulder in the parade ground style, a big grin on his face.

‘Looks like the booby traps did their job,’ he said, as though they had been his idea and not Varus’. ‘I knew they would.’

I understood then why Lopata had never made corporal. The arrogance of the man was staggering, and he just didn’t have the right temperament for even a junior command role.

‘Yes, boss,’ I said, and kept my thoughts to myself.

I’ll admit it now, but I’d always been a bit scared of Lopata. The whole business about him having been a ganger back home was all too believable.

Varus came back then, and reported what she had found.

‘Four orks, boss,’ she said. ‘All dead. From the bodies, I reckon the boy got two of them, and the grenades took care of the other two.’

The boy. I sighed. I was the youngest member of the platoon, but I was getting tired of hearing that by then.

‘I’ve got a name,’ I protested.

‘Course you have,’ she smirked, and turned away.

I really didn’t much like Varus either.

‘Now what?’ Blashak asked.

Lopata shrugged.

‘Dig in,’ he said. ‘Those must have just been more scouts, but that’s two scout parties they’ve sent out now that haven’t come back. Sooner or later even greenskins are going to start thinking that’s a bit odd. Sooner or later they’re going to want to come and find out why that is, and it won’t just be four of them next time.’

‘Yes, boss,’ we chorused, and went to set about it.

It was the worst sort of ground for digging in, and within an hour my foxhole had a foot of water in the bottom of it. Lopata had the right of it, though, for all that. With only the four of us, very few grenades and no heavy weapons, we needed every possible advantage we could wring out of the miserable terrain.

All day we held the settlement, watching and waiting for orks that didn’t come. Nerves fraying, we ate the food the colonists gave us and watched the sky gradually darken overhead. Lopata was just finishing sucking sticky rice off his fingers when Varus cocked her head and held up a hand for silence.

‘I hear something,’ she whispered.

We froze, hands creeping towards our weapons.

‘Sounds like...’ Blashak started.

‘Engines,’ Lopata said, and leapt to his feet. ‘That’s a Valkyrie!’

‘I guess not quite everyone has left yet after all,’ Varus said. ‘What happened to that flare pistol? Quickly!’

‘My pack, in the house,’ Blashak said.

He hauled himself out of the foxhole we were sharing and dashed across the street and into the prefab.

‘Come on, come on!’ Lopata shouted.

Blashak was back a moment later with the bulky Navy pistol in his hand. Lopata snatched it off him and checked it over quickly, making sure the flare charge was correctly chambered. We only had the one.

‘Where is it?’ Lopata muttered, scanning the rapidly darkening sky. ‘Don’t do this to me, where are you?’

‘Lights, there!’ Varus said, pointing urgently.

I could see the Valkyrie’s running lights moving in the distance, its trajectory indicating that it would pass within a couple of miles of the settlement. Lopata lifted the pistol in both hands and aimed it straight up, trying to work out the best moment to make sure the Valkyrie actually saw us.

‘Here goes nothing,’ he said, and squeezed the trigger.

The pistol kicked in his hand and hurled the Navy distress flare into the sky. It blossomed crimson in the darkness overhead, illuminating the jungle canopy for a good mile around our position. If the greenskins didn’t know where we were before, they did now.

The flare began to slowly float down, but the Valkyrie was already banking towards us and beginning to shed altitude as it came. The Guard don’t use distress flares, so the carrier’s crew must have taken us for fellow Navy men shot down over the jungle, and that brought them running. We scattered as the heavy carrier came in over the settlement and hovered, the downwash from its powerful twin engines throwing up fantails of muddy water from the ground. Lopata waved his arms frantically over his head, and the aircraft’s nose-mounted searchlight stabbed on and bathed him in harsh white light.

A moment later the Valkyrie came in to land and the roar of its engines

faded to an idling throb as the pilot throttled down. The side hatch opened and a woman in Navy uniform stuck her head out.

‘Guard!’ Lopata shouted. ‘We’re Guard! Reslian Forty-Fifth. We could *really* use a ride out of here.’

The Navy woman nodded.

‘You haven’t half cut it fine,’ she said. ‘The last transport leaves tomorrow, and we’re on it. How many of you?’

‘Four,’ Lopata said.

‘I’ve only got three spaces, but... I’ll make it work, fly low if I have to. Get in.’

I stared at Lopata as the sick realisation dawned on me, cursing my own stupid naivety.

‘Wait a minute,’ I said. ‘I thought... I thought we were asking them to help us with the orks, not...’

‘What?’ Lopata spat at me. ‘This is our ticket out, you idiot. This is our salvation!’

I turned and pointed at the buildings of the settlement.

‘What about *their* salvation, Lopata?’

‘Life’s tough,’ the big man said. ‘They were going to die anyway – all this means is we don’t have to die with them. Now shut up and get in that carrier.’

‘We can’t just leave them,’ I said.

‘Not our problem,’ Blashak said. ‘Get in the damn carrier, boy.’

‘No,’ I said.

‘That’s an order,’ Lopata said.

‘No,’ I said again. ‘What happened to “I say we die well”, Lopata?’

‘You know what’s better than a good death, you stupid boot?’ he shouted at me. ‘*Not dying*, that’s what!’

I looked up and met his eyes. Lopata was scared, I realised. Everyone was, especially me. Some of the younger children had crept out of their prefabs to gawp at the Valkyrie in chattering excitement. I shook my head and pointed at the children.

‘I’m not leaving them,’ I said. ‘I mean it.’

‘Are you mudfoots coming or not?’ the Navy woman demanded. ‘I’m not missing that transport for the sake of your argument! Get in now or we’re going without you.’

‘We’re coming,’ Lopata said, and hauled himself up into the crew bay of the waiting carrier with Blashak right behind him.

Varus put a hand on the hatchway and turned to look at me.

‘Last chance, hero,’ she said.

I shook my head.

‘I’m no hero,’ I said, and turned my back on her. ‘I’m just not a coward.’

Behind me, engines screamed as the Valkyrie lifted off without me.

So that’s what happened.

I think this will probably be my last journal entry. It’s midnight now, and in the morning the orks will come, and find me waiting for them.

I’m no hero, and I’m not looking for a medal. No one will ever even know that I did this, or that these people were left for dead by the high command. Just like those children, I am one amongst countless billions. Utterly insignificant. No one will ever know my name. I know the people back home don’t want to hear anything but rousing victory speeches.

And they never will.

If anyone does ever find this journal, tell my mother that I love her.

Tell her that I love her, and I’m sorry. I had to stay, Ma. This is why I was saved in the crash, I’m sure of it.

I’m no hero, but the Emperor protects, and I am the instrument of His will. While there are civilians still here and in need of that protection, the Emperor expects me to do my duty. There are so many children here.

I turn nineteen tomorrow.

It’s going to be quite a day.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Peter McLean has written the short stories ‘Baphomet by Night’ and ‘No Hero’ for Warhammer 40,000. He grew up in Norwich, where he began story-writing, practising martial arts and practical magic, and lives there still with his wife.

An extract from [Honourbound](#).



Jona Veer is a dead man, covered in blood.

He runs as fast as his legs will carry him. They are burning nearly as bad as his lungs are from the smoke. The forge complex is thick with it, like fog blown in off the water. It wreathes massive machines that line the aisles, and curls up towards a vaulted ceiling. His boots ring off rust-stained decking as he lurches over thick loops of cabling and splashes through the filthy water sluicing from vast industrial laser cutters and plasma burners that make up the tank assembly line. Panel beaters stutter on repeat, and lifters whine and gasp as they raise and lower sheets of steel. All of that machinery sends ash into the air. It blizzards around Veer, getting in his eyes and making them itch and sting. Everything smells like burning and death. Tastes like it too.

Or maybe that's just from when Chiya's blood got in his mouth.

He retches so hard it makes him stagger, but nothing will come up except thick ropes of bile. Her face had opened up like a wyldblossom, red and blooming as she shouted at him.

Shoot, you damned fool! Shoot!

Veer hears them behind him. The Sighted. They are laughing and clattering their weapons off the hulls of tanks. Those wicked knives that he saw gut Soli and Fren. They had opened them up slow, laughing all the while, then they'd used the blood to paint things on their skin. Things that made him sick while he hid, still not able to shoot.

Clatter. Clatter.

Clatter.

It comes from everywhere, and it sounds so close. Throne, how he doesn't want that death. That slow spill of his guts or a bullet to the head.

But then, Veer doesn't want any death at all. Not an honourable one either, like the others. He wants to live. Veer starts running again and he tastes something else now too, mixing with the ashes and with Chiya's blood.

It's salt, from the tears tracking through the dirt on his face.

'Come back, soldier,' the Sighted shout from behind him. 'We are not finished with you yet.'

Their voices come in the gaps between the thrumming machine noise as the manufactory keeps working, oblivious to the war at its heart. Servitors trundle back and forth on heavy tracks, paying no heed to Veer as he runs. Half-finished chassis of tanks judder along the line to have their armour machined in place. God-killers, built to fell Titans. Veer isn't a god-killer. He's not a killer of any kind. He couldn't even *shoot*. Not to save Chiya, or even Soli and his damned awful singing.

He's nearly at the end of the line. The chassis of the last Stormlord to roll off the ash-clogged assembly-way waits like a great dark creature in the smoke, terrifying and immobile, complete save for the lighting of its reactor heart. He could hide under it, if he could just get to it.

But Veer doesn't get close. With his eyes full of smoke and sweat and blood that isn't his, he runs right into a shadowy figure that sends him crashing to the ground. The impact of it doesn't hurt him really, but it gets him crying all the worse.

The Sighted he ran into squats on his heels in front of him and cocks his head. His eyes are without irises, just black from centre to edge, and cruel, though the smile beneath them is much crueller. Small silver mirrors and multicoloured tattered feathers hang on a loop of cord around the Sighted's neck. His fatigues are blue and grey under the bloodstains, and his combat vest hangs open to show all of the carvings in his pale skin. This close, Veer realises they are dates. Times. All scored in spirals. There are new ones painted over the top in blood.

'There we are, little soldier,' the Sighted says, in his strange accent.

The Sighted pulls his knife as the others come up behind Veer. He can hear them all laughing, his lasgun cold in his hands. He could shoot. He should shoot. His fingers twitch by the trigger.

'Oh,' the Sighted says, with a black-toothed smile. 'Will you shoot me, Antari? It seems so late to try. Too late for all of your comrades.'

Chiya's voice echoes in Veer's head.

Shoot, you damned fool! Shoot!

But Veer doesn't shoot this time either. His lungs ache and his limbs burn. When he blinks, his eyelids stick from the blood on his face. Veer lets out a shaking, slow breath.

And drops his rifle on the ground.

'I yield,' he rasps. 'Just spare me, please.'

The Sighted laughs so loud that it carries even over the machine noise. His brothers and sisters join in, like a flock of crows cawing.

'And what use would you be to me? A soldier who will not even shoot.' The Sighted pauses, then sighs. 'But your blood. That is another matter.'

He raises the knife, and Veer squeezes his eyes shut. Holds his breath.

But the strike never lands; instead there's a series of loud, flat bangs and the whip-crack of las-fire. Blood hits his face for the second time, only this time it's cold and it smells as though it were spilt a week ago. Veer collapses forwards, retching again. A figure moves to stand above him. He sees the toes of black, mud-spattered boots, and Veer's blood goes cold too. He knows who it is before he looks up. Severina Raine.

The commissar.

'On your feet, Jona Veer.'

He finds that he can't say her name, her rank. He can't say much of anything. When he stands, his legs nearly go from under him. Commissar Raine is a shadow in a shadowed place, all dressed in black with the gilt edges of her uniform dulled by ashes and dirt. Her black greatcoat snaps as it catches in the hot air of the forge. Her silver chest-plate is scored and dented from impacts and knife edges, because the commissar never runs.

Not like he did.

Veer finally looks her in the face. Raine's tawny skin is scarred, and her dark eyes are as cold and still as deep water. Behind Raine there are others wearing Veer's colours. Splintered green and grey. He sees Sergeant Wyck with his squad behind him, and Captain Hale too. There's no movement in Hale's scarred face, not even a blink. Wyck says something that he can't hear and shakes his head, just a little.

Veer thinks he's saying *stupid*.

Raine's eyes flicker down to where Veer's rifle lies in the ashes and dust.

'Your powercell is full,' she says. 'You haven't fired a shot.'

Veer can't lie now, just as he couldn't shoot before. It's an impossibility.

‘No,’ he says.

‘You ran,’ she says. ‘In the face of the enemy, you failed to fire your rifle, and then you ran.’

Veer thinks about it. About Chiya’s face and all that blood and the way that Fren tried to grab hold of him and snap him out of it.

About how he pushed Fren to the ground so that the Sighted would get him first.

‘Yes,’ he says, his voice a rasp.

Raine’s eyes don’t change. There’s no malice in them, just that same deep cold. She raises the ornate black and crimson pistol she carries and points it at his face.

‘Jona Veer,’ she says. ‘I find you in dereliction of your duty to the Eleventh Antari Rifles, to the Bale Stars Crusade, and to our Holy Lord on Terra. The punishment is death.’

A tear slides down Veer’s face again, and he wishes it wouldn’t. Not in front of his own.

‘Do you have anything to say in your defence?’ Raine asks.

Veer listens to the thunder of the machines around him. Motes of ash drift past his face. He is shaking from head to toe, like being caught out in the cold.

‘I just wanted to live,’ he says, his voice cracking.

Raine lets out a slow breath. Veer hears the creak of her gloves as she moves her fingers.

‘Then you should have stayed to fight,’ she says.

And the maw of the pistol lights up.


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