

WARHAMMER
40,000

BETTER THE DEVIL

Steve Lyons



**DESPERATE WARFARE ACROSS THE FIRE-SCORCHED
BATTLEFIELDS OF THE IMPERIUM**

A WARHAMMER 40,000 STORY
BETTER THE DEVIL

Imperial Guard - 01.2
Steve Lyons
(An Undead Scan v1.5)



When Lorenzo came round...

He was blindfolded, bound and sinking. He could feel the burn of the Catachan sun on one side of his face, the sting of its mud on the other, and the creepers that tied his hands and feet were contracting as they dried, pulling him into an unnatural hunch, his spine already aching with the increasing pressure.

And that wasn't the worst of it.

The smell was like rotten fruit and vinegar, sickly and acidic at the same time. It tripped some primal alarm in Lorenzo's head, made his every nerve scream out.

He shifted, strained, tried to work out how much give he had. Not much, he concluded. Dry shoots cracked beneath his weight and released a fresh vinegar wave. Lorenzo rarely questioned his own senses, but he did so now. He asked himself if he could be hallucinating, if the drugs he'd been force-fed could be fuelling his paranoia, making him imagine his worst fear—because otherwise, if the smell was indeed real, then why wasn't he dead yet?

He *wasn't* dead. That was all he needed to know. At least, so his upbringing told him. It was only a matter of time, though, before that changed. He'd be snapped in two; most likely living out his final minutes a sightless, helpless cripple until the mud claimed him. An hour from now, there'd be no trace he had ever been here.

Lorenzo focused on that immediate test, tried to think past the fear. It was a test not so much of skill, he realised, but of resolve. His bonds had been tied well, as he would have expected; they entangled his body beyond all hope of escape—unless he could change his body's shape.

The fear worked for him now, the need to be free blotting out all other considerations. Lorenzo wasted no time on preparing himself, in anticipation of what was to come. He worked his left shoulder out of its socket, and the lancing pain brought tears to his eyes, almost made him black out, but he clenched his teeth and he breathed through it. The creepers slackened, almost imperceptibly but enough for his needs. He squirmed his way free of them, as the bones in his shoulder ground and crunched and popped. And he snatched the blindfold from his face—to find, to his gut-wrenching horror, that the worst had indeed happened.

Lorenzo reached for his knife, his trusty Catachan fang, and his palm moulded itself to the handle as if it were a part of him, an extra limb. In his own mind, it was. He had carved the blade himself when he was seven, spent the intervening ten years honing it to perfection. It only occurred to him now, with hindsight, that the men who had drugged him, brought him here, might have taken it from him—but no, they would never have dared break that bond.

He hacked at the remaining dry creepers, haste rendering his strokes imprecise, costing him time despite his best efforts to find focus. He freed his feet, at last, and hauled himself out of the sucking mud into an unsteady standing position. His lungs were heaving, partly from exertion, partly from panic at the thought of where he was, of what they had done to him: dumped him in a *den*.

Half-chewed reeds clung to his clothes and his skin, coating him in their stink. His right foot had been resting against a knee-high pile of droppings, which had burnt through the sole of his boot—and he'd just stepped back onto a skull of some kind, which caved in beneath his heel. Many more bones festooned the area, most of them picked clean. The majority of them came from small jungle creatures but more than a few were distinctly human. The fact that the den was empty came as small comfort. Lorenzo's eyes searched the trees for a spark of intelligence, a shuffle of movement, any sign of its occupant's return. Why *wasn't* he dead?

Don't question it, he told himself. Your one chance now is to run, to pray you are faster than it is, because it is certainly stronger, more cunning, more vicious, than you are. But which way? Can't see it, can't sense it. Where is it waiting?

He couldn't believe this was happening, couldn't believe he had been left like this, at the mercy of a monster. The most deadly of predators on this most deadly of worlds.

Lorenzo had seen a Catachan Devil laid low only once, and it had taken four men, each older and far more experienced than he was, to achieve that feat.

He didn't stop to think. He ran, heedless of the many and varied perils about him, the traps they set for the unwary. He ran, trusting to good fortune to keep him safe although good fortune was rare in the jungle. He ran, not pausing to reset his shoulder, letting his left arm hang numb by his side. And he knew that running would do him no good, because it was already too late.

Lorenzo had the Devil's scent on him now—and no distance would be far enough to keep it from hunting him down.

He had to go back.

He couldn't go back.

He had no choice. He had no idea where he was. He had to get back to the Tower, back the way he had come—back the way he had been brought, rather. He had to follow his captors' tracks, the ones they must have left after they had abandoned him. He had to go back to the den.

Lorenzo felt sick at the thought, and his nerves were screaming again.

He couldn't stay here much longer. The surrounding vegetation, dark, dense and twisted, had begun to react to a human presence, to orient itself towards him. It reached out with its branches and its shoots, and some plants had even begun to shuffle in his direction. The movement was slight, too slight to see yet, but Lorenzo could sense it. He could also hear the drone of an insect swarm, and something even closer: a slither, a rustle, a hiss.

The snake, rearing up on its tail, was almost six paces tall, its scaled armour a jet black in hue, a spiky hood flaring about its triangular head as its mouth gaped open. A flying swamp mamba. It must have sensed Lorenzo's preoccupation and used it to get close, hoping for an easy kill—but he'd seen it now, faced it with his blade in hand, and it was suddenly less sure of itself. The mamba swayed slightly, fixing him with its poisonous yellow eyes as if it thought it could hypnotise him. He knew, if he blinked, it would be on him, at his throat. But maybe it could help him too.

Lorenzo shifted his stance a fraction, to suggest tiredness. The snake fell for his feint, and its head stabbed towards him. Its fangs were the length of his hands, drooling clear venom. He sidestepped the lunge and drove his blade toward the exposed back of its head, but pain from his shoulder shot through him, threw his balance, and he did no more than dislodge a few scales.

Living up to its name, the flying mamba shot itself into the air with a casual tail flick, and Lorenzo gasped as its coils whipped around him. His dead left arm was pinned, but he managed to keep the right free and lashed out once more, half-blindly. The snake's head had been coming for his throat again, and he cut a deep gash across its left eye. The head withdrew, but the body increased the pressure about his ribs, attempting to crush him into submission.

Lorenzo's fang went back to work, sawing at the snake's armour until green, viscous blood welled onto his hand. His chest felt as if it would crack, each breath a feat of heroism, and he didn't know which could endure the longer, he or his foe—but the mamba lost its nerve first, its head darting back into striking range in a last, desperate attempt to claim victory. Lorenzo drove his knife between its fangs, up through the roof of its mouth into its tiny brain, and its coils fell limp.

An unexpected weakness rushed to his legs, and he almost fell atop the snake but willed himself to remain upright. Brief as his skirmish had been, it would have attracted attention. The eyes of a dozen creatures, some invisible to him, some lurking on the periphery of his senses, were upon him, looking for a sign that he had been weakened, that now was a good time to chance their own luck against him.

The snake's blood still flowed freely, and Lorenzo bathed his hands in it, rubbed his clothes in it and smeared it across his face before it dried up. The stench of it made him gag, but it masked the far more dangerous smell of the den—at least to Lorenzo's nose. It was unlikely that the keener senses of a Catachan Devil would be fooled—but they might at least be momentarily confused, and that was something.

He approached the den from downwind, hoping this too might give him some small advantage. His shoulder still throbbed with the ghost of the agony he'd felt as he had braced himself against a gnarled tree and pushed it back into place. Lorenzo trod as lightly as he could and kept his breathing shallow, almost silent, although it was still deafening to his ears.

Reaching a suitable vantage point, he teased aside thin, whip-like branches and peered through the gap thus created. He allowed himself a faint sigh of relief as he saw everything as he'd left it, the den trampled and broken from his intrusion but nobody and nothing else present. Maybe, he thought, its owner was dead. Maybe his captors had found the den empty and decided to use it to play a joke on him. It was unlikely, though. Not much could keep a Devil from returning to its lair to die—and "Barracuda" Creek hadn't seemed like a man with a sense of humour.

Lorenzo circled the den, keeping a wide berth to get no more of its scent on him than he already had. The first trail leading from it, he uncovered in short order—but his instincts told him it was too obvious, and he carried on searching.

The second trail was better hidden, every care taken not to disturb the undergrowth, but there were signs for the trained eye; a broken twig here, a branch pushed aside there, an unnatural smoothness to the ground where footprints had been brushed out. It was this trail, then, that he followed. And he knew he had made the right decision when, some twenty minutes later, he came upon a body.

It was lying facedown in a patch of weeds; a young man, like him, squat and powerfully muscled even by their people's standards. Lorenzo couldn't see what had killed him at first—he couldn't get too close until he had ruled out

infection; some jungle-borne diseases killed at a dozen paces—but then he saw the puncture wound between the man's shoulder blades, and his blood chilled.

The Devil must have crept up on him, driven the poisonous barb of its tail into its victim's back before he could turn. And it could only have happened a few hours ago, because the body was intact, not yet stripped to its skeleton by the jungle's plants and its smaller scavengers.

The man was holding something: an improvised spear with a sharpened stone head. It was crude, evidently assembled in a hurry. Crouching by his side now, Lorenzo prised the weapon from his cold, stiff fingers. He had no compunction at all about so doing: the spear was no use to this fallen soldier anymore, but it might save Lorenzo's life. The dead man's fang, on the other hand, he took as a mark of respect, hoping that one day he could return it to his clan for burial. He tucked the blade into his boot and returned to the trail.

He thought he knew now what Creek had done, had had his men hogtie the Catachan Devil, at insane risk to their own lives, and haul it away from here. A few kilometres would have been far enough, then they would have set the monster loose and run for it. Denied an immediate chance of revenge, the Devil's first thought would have been to find its way back home—where by now it must have found a vandalised den and the culprit's inviting scent trail waiting for it.

It was behind him. Lorenzo didn't know how far behind, but it was there. A short head start was all he had been given. A chance of survival, but a slim one.

He couldn't fight it. He couldn't imagine doing such a thing—and if it came to it, he would certainly need more weapons than he had to even try. Nor could he outpace it, not while he was following in his tormentors' too-faint footprints.

All he could do was wait for it. Wait for the Devil, watch for it in every shadow, listen for it in every sound. Wait for the Devil, and hope to be better prepared for its attack than his predecessor had been... The last man to take Creek's test, to travel this route... The man whose pain-contorted corpse would remain a vivid image in the space behind Lorenzo's eyelids for some time to come.

It was almost a relief when the waiting ended and terror struck.

Lorenzo had been right about his stalker: it was stealthy. Had he not known it was coming, he might have blamed the rustling sound behind him on a creature far smaller than it was, might have missed the faint but familiar scent on the air. Even with those warnings, he barely had time to turn, to drop into a defensive crouch, to raise his fang, as the Devil came at him.

It was an old one, too. A big one. Big and nasty. At least twenty pairs of legs. It thrust its maw into Lorenzo's face, its mandibles click-clacking, acidic drool spraying his cheeks, and looking down its throat was like staring into an infernal pit. The Devil's front claws were gigantic, snapping at him, attempting to gain purchase. Lorenzo pushed his newly-acquired spear into one of them, jamming it open, and he braced an arm across the creature's thorax, using his leverage to force the head up, away from him. At the same time, he fended off the second claw with his fang, but its blade glanced off an armoured carapace and the Devil succeeded in gouging a chunk of flesh from his right calf, eliciting a hoarse yell from him. It was too strong for Lorenzo, too heavy, bearing him to the ground, and he still had its tail to worry about.

He saw its shadow over him, felt the downdraught of its approach, and he knew he had to time his next move perfectly. He shifted his weight, ducked, rolled beneath the Devil's front section, even as its tail smacked into the ground where he had just been and buried itself. The Devil was off-balance, but not for long. Lorenzo made a run for it, impulsively lashing out at a blood-wasp hive so that its occupants swarmed out into his attacker's path. They were no threat to it, not like they would have been to him, but Lorenzo prayed they might blind it for a second before they realised what they'd taken on and abandoned their home forever.

He didn't dare look back to check, knew he couldn't spare the instant it would take him to do so. The Devil was probably reaching for him, bringing up its tail to strike him down, and like its last victim he wouldn't even see it coming.

But the killing blow never came, and Lorenzo was clear, he could no longer sense his bulkier, slower pursuer at his heels. He had escaped it. For now.

The whole encounter had taken less than ten seconds from start to finish. Lorenzo was astonished, and proud of himself, that he had lasted so long.

He maintained a punishing pace for the next few hours, though he didn't know where he was going: the trail was well and truly lost now, and Lorenzo didn't dare go back to search for it again because he knew what would be waiting for him. Instead he looked for higher ground where he could, and hoped to come across a hilltop or cliff edge from which he could survey the surrounding terrain.

He had been heading in roughly the same direction—north-north-west—since he'd left the den, but he wouldn't have put it past Creek and his men to have led him this far only to double back on themselves.

For the time being, however, orientation was the least of his problems.

It would take a while for the Devil to catch up to him, but catch up it certainly would. Its breed was nothing if not tenacious—and though, when Lorenzo was at his best, the Devil couldn't match him for speed, he couldn't be at his best all the time. Already, his wounded leg was beginning to tell, to slow him down, and he was tiring. He tried not to think about how long it had been since he had last slept. Slept properly, that was, because the drug-induced coma of the morning had hardly recharged him.

When he felt safe to do so, he slowed down and started to look for plants from which he could tease water, leaves with antiseptic properties that could dress his wound. Neither of these tasks were simple: on Catachan, the flora was more likely to kill than to cure, and Lorenzo needed all his concentration, couldn't afford the slightest slip, if he was to sift what little good there was from the downright fatal.

Lying on his stomach, he reached between the branches of a brainleaf for edible berries, knowing that the slightest breath of air would alert the plant to his presence; cause it to fire its tendrils into him. If that happened, he would no longer be Lorenzo, no longer be a man at all, but the brainleaf's unthinking meat puppet. This ought to have been a two-man job: one to obtain the berries while the other kept watch over him. Were the Catachan Devil to appear now—if so much as a heretic ant were to happen by, for that matter—it would be the end of him.

The operation was successful however—moderately refreshed, his leg newly bandaged with strips of his own shirt, Lorenzo moved on.

Nightfall changed the character of the jungle, while making it no less dangerous. The creatures of the daytime retired, and the air was filled with the chirruping and the hissing of their nocturnal counterparts. The thick canopy kept in much of the sweltering heat of the day, but the shadows grew deeper and more numerous so that lurking threats were far harder to detect. Some plants curled up their blossoms and slept, while others awoke to dance in the darkness.

Lorenzo had been following the rushing sound of a river, and he came to its bank now. The water was clear, glistening, inviting, and his dry throat tensed in anticipation of relief—but the algae on its surface was of a toxic type, and one known to spawn a flesh-eating virus. There would be no relief here.

He shinned up a tall tree, careful not to damage its bark and unleash the poison spores beneath it. From up here he could see a small patch of sky and identify its stars, thankful that the night wasn't overcast, that acidic clouds weren't gathering. Lorenzo knew now, at last, where on Catachan he was, and

where he had to go—and fortunately, the blind wanderings of the evening had not brought him too far off course. He could still reach the Ashmadia Tower before he dropped, he figured. If he could stay alive that long.

For the hundredth time, he let his thoughts drift back three days, to a room on the Tower's mid-level and his first—his only—face-to-face meeting with Sergeant “Barracuda” Creek. He ran their conversation through his mind, trying to work out what he'd said, what he had done, to raise the other man's ire, to make him think he deserved this, deserved to have a monster put on his tail.

“I don't think you're ready,” Creek had told him bluntly.

“But I've done all the training,” he'd protested. “I've passed your tests. I've done everything you asked of me.”

“Oh yeah, you've gone through the motions well enough—but I want more than that, Lorenzo. I want to know there's fire in your belly.”

“Fire” was one thing, but this... No one could have expected him to deal with this, to outfight a Devil alone. Not at his young age. *Not at any age...* And a fierce resolve swelled in Lorenzo at that thought: a resolve to prove himself. To slay the Devil after all, and to march up to the Tower with its tail slung over his shoulder, its carcass dragged behind him. He imagined Creek's face when he did so: the surprise and the grudging admiration in that spiteful son-of-a-grox's sunken black eyes.

Then his thoughts returned to reality. He remembered burning spittle on his face, the *whoosh* of a death-dealing tail against his back, and the mental picture faded.

Lorenzo's wounded right leg chimed in with a mournful throb. He could feel it stiffening. He thought it might have been infected, but there was no point removing the dressing as there was little he could do about it anyway, out here. He could no longer focus through the pain, no longer keep up his accelerated pace, which meant that the Devil—for he knew it was still following him, even if he had detected no sign of it for hours—would be starting to close in.

Lorenzo thought long and hard before he eased himself into the river. It was another way of masking his trail, of delaying his pursuer, but it would also expose him to untold other dangers, dangers he would be less able to detect in the waist-high water. He knew that reptiles and aquatic rodents concealed themselves in the cracks of the riverbed, and that some types of weed could drag him under in a heartbeat if he stepped on them. And indeed, he had only been wading for a few minutes when he disturbed a small nest of leeches.

Fortunately, only four younglings were at home, and Lorenzo's Catachan fang despatched three of them in two strokes, the second thrust lopping off two

heads at once. He cursed, however, as he realised that the fourth leech had sunk its circular jaws through the threadbare leather of his damaged boot. He pulled himself onto the bank, and tore the bloated creature painfully from his right heel. He smacked it into the ground so that it burst and showered him with his own stolen blood.

It was about an hour later that Lorenzo saw the first sign of an altogether more worrying presence. Not that he could have missed it. A moment ago, the foliage around him had grown thick and high, crowding each side of the river; now, suddenly, it fell away to leave him wading through a large, open area.

Immediately, he knew this was no natural glade, nor had it been cleared by human hands or tools. The ground was coated with a glutinous brown slime: plant and animal life had once thrived here, but all had been reduced to this. The stench of decay hung heavy in the air—and, underpinning it, a subtler burnt odour.

Lorenzo had seen devastation like this before, more than once. He had been just three years old when his mother had shown him the devolved remains of a Catachan fortress, much like the one in which they lived and none too distant from it. It had probably taken just one slip, she'd said, one small misstep, to bring about the end. The hapless culprit had probably never even known what he'd done, hadn't lived long enough to realise he had disturbed a barking toad.

The galaxy's most poisonous creature, and one with a unique defence mechanism. Uniquely explosive, that was.

Lorenzo hauled himself out of the water, knowing that for the next few kilometres he would have to proceed with extra caution, needed to know exactly where he was stepping. The toad that had blown itself up here had been a small one, its blast diameter less than two hundred metres—but still, Lorenzo knew that nothing would ever grow in this area again.

And, where there had been one barking toad, there were bound to be others.

Sure enough, he had barely crossed the dead zone and re-entered the trees when he heard a distinctive cough-like cry from ahead, to his right, from the river—then an answering call from the left, too close by for comfort. Lorenzo's stomach tightened at the thought of the peril before him—and of how it would slow him down, and make him far easier prey for the one still closing in from behind.

But perhaps, he thought, there was some hope after all—some way in which he could set one imminent threat against the other, and come out on top of both.

It wasn't long before he found what he was looking for. The barking toad

was deceptively small and fragile-seeming—and, unlike most of the creatures of Catachan, it didn't appear remotely resentful of a human presence. Lorenzo supposed its kind was well used to being left alone. He followed it for a little over ten minutes—from a distance, of course—during which it hopped about without apparent aim, as if it were playing with him. Then it sprang into a patch of weeds, and was lost.

Lorenzo searched again, and this time he had more luck. A second toad led him back to the river, where he was just in time to see it slipping into a nook in the bank. He could tell from the guttural sounds that greeted it that there were three or four more toads in there: a family unit, he supposed. Perfect for his needs.

He gathered creepers from the surrounding trees, started to twist and to knot them together. It was fiddly work, and time-consuming, and Lorenzo's tired eyes began to blur. He found a sizeable enough boulder, threaded his makeshift rope about it, and hauled it onto his good shoulder, and from there into the V-shaped crook of a stout tree. By now, he feared very much that he had been still too long, that the Devil could appear at any moment—and as before, that fear only slowed him further.

At last, though, his work was done, and he stepped back to inspect the results. He had rigged his tripwire high so as not to be triggered by anything too small—but in the darkness, even he would have been hard-pushed to see it without forewarning. Anyway, as a rule, Catachan Devils didn't tread carefully. They had no need.

At least, Lorenzo was banking on this particular Devil believing that, on it walking confidently into his wire, yanking the boulder from its tree. The rock would smack right into the toads' burrow like a wrecking ball—and its four or five occupants would react in the only way they knew how. Even if some of them could contain themselves, he only needed one to panic, to spark a chain reaction...

Would it be enough? Lorenzo didn't know. He had to believe it might be. The armour hadn't yet been forged that a cloud of barking toad poison couldn't liquefy in a heartbeat—and this cloud would be four or five times normal strength. But then, no man-made armour was as strong as the natural plating of an elderly Devil—and the flesh beneath those plates was almost as tough.

He moved on, parting company with the river now as it bent toward the north, and he waited and listened and prayed to the God-Emperor that his plan would succeed, because he didn't know what else he could try if it didn't.

The explosion came sooner than he had anticipated. It rocked the ground

beneath him, almost threw him off his feet. Lorenzo fought down a lump in his throat as he turned to find a thick green cloud blossoming behind him, vegetation wilting in its embrace, and he knew if he had been a fraction slower, taken a minute longer over the setting of his trap, he would have been caught in that cloud himself.

But he hadn't been slower, he told himself. He'd survived. Again. And this time he had done more than that. He had—could this even be possible?—he had triumphed over his foe. Done what few men had achieved. He, Lorenzo, just seventeen years old, single-handedly, had faced down and killed—*killed*—a Catachan Devil.

...maybe...

He didn't know what to do, then. He stood and watched as the green cloud settled, and a part of him longed to go back, once it was safe to do so, to find the Devil's remains and to verify his kill. Images of a triumphant return, a hero's welcome, played in his mind again—but what if there *were* no remains? What if the Devil had been reduced, as everything in its vicinity must have been, to sludge? Every second Lorenzo spent in the jungle, alone, wearying, increased the risk to his life—was it wise to prolong his time out here for what was, at best, a small chance of glory?

And what if the Devil was still alive? What if it was waiting for him?

It was with reluctance, then, that he tore himself away from that spot. It was with a sense of shame, too, because he felt he had made the wrong choice, the cowardly choice, and he was sure that “Barracuda” Creek would delight in telling him so.

The sky was beginning to lighten, the first insects of the morning striking up a low, growling hum while other, bigger creatures stirred in the undergrowth. Through his growing fatigue, Lorenzo heard the screeches of carrion birds as they woke to discover his recent handiwork, now a few kilometres behind him. Not that the barking toads would have left them too much to feed on.

He climbed another tree to take a final bearing from the fading stars—and found to his relief that he could see his destination. The Ashmadia Tower was by some way the tallest structure on Catachan—conceitedly so—and the Imperial Eagle still gleamed at its black tip, despite the best efforts of the elements to erode it.

He had disturbed a retiring bat, which flew at him and tore at his face and hair. With his fang, Lorenzo impaled it against the tree trunk—but a dizzy wave crashed over him, and he almost fell from his perch. He longed to close his eyes,

to sleep—but he knew that if he did, alone out here, he wouldn't wake up again. He buoyed himself with the knowledge that his trial was almost over. If only his temples weren't pounding so, and his muscles so weak from dehydration...

He dropped from the tree, but his bad leg gave way and he landed heavily on his backside. He forced himself to stand, to march on, making himself focus on nothing more than that endeavour. Scan the ground ahead, left foot forward, drag the right foot after it, repeat... and he thought about the Catachan Devil, and convinced himself that he must have killed it, that Creek would be able to verify that fact, that he'd get his hero's welcome after all—and Lorenzo wasn't about to miss that, couldn't bear to have come so close, achieved so much, to fall at this final hurdle.

He saw the patch of spikers just in time. They were laid out in a thin band, as tall as he was, spreading into the trees to each side of him, and he couldn't guess how long it would take him to go round them.

He fell back on an old Catachan trick instead: he flushed a small lizard out from a nearby hole, and swiped at it with his fang as it spat venom at him. He left it alive but wounded, blocking its attempts to flee past him until it had just one way to go.

The spikers shot their payloads, and Lorenzo leapt for cover. The air was suddenly thick with black, needle-thin, thorns, and his protective tree trembled with the thuds of their multiple impacts. As soon as those impacts had ceased, he made a run for it.

He ploughed through the denuded plants, moving as fast as his leg would allow him. Already, the spikers' leaves were bristling anew, and he flung himself to the ground as he drew clear of them, only just ahead of their second discharge.

Hundreds of fresh thorns sprayed over him, but they'd been aimed too high from too far away, and they covered his back without piercing his skin. He picked himself up, breathlessly, and shook the thorns off him. And his eyes alighted upon the luckless lizard, now wandering confused and already sprouting the first prickly leaf of its own. Soon, there would be one more spiker in this patch: an unusually small one.

He gathered up some thorns, and carefully broke a few open, dripping their poison onto the tip of his blade. A dozen more, he bundled together and held at arm's length, gingerly, ensuring that none could scratch him. The Devil may have been dead—oh, please, let it be dead—but there were other creatures out there.

He was being followed again.

He hadn't been sure at first. Tiredness was making his head swim, and Lorenzo's senses had started to deceive him, made him see threats in the random shapes of the foliage, made him fear he might be too distracted to see the real threats when they came. He jumped at every shifting shadow cast by the rising sun, every slight sound borne on the morning breeze—and he had blamed his own sleep-deprived paranoia for piecing those subtle signs together, unreliable though they were, to paint a nightmare picture for his mind's eye.

That was what he had thought at first. Not now.

He hadn't yet clapped eyes on his pursuer. It was animal, though, not vegetable, as he knew that none of Catachan's plants could have kept pace with him for so long. It was big, too: Lorenzo could tell this from the force with which twigs snapped beneath its feet, from the pattern of displacement of the bushes in its path, though he had barely glimpsed this latter. Too big to be one of Creek's men, presenting him with one final challenge. Almost big enough to be...

Don't think that!

...a razor-tusk? But no, a razor-tusk wouldn't have had the intelligence to stalk a man, to remain unseen, and this thing could certainly do that. Even when Lorenzo slipped behind a bush and held his breath and the creature couldn't have heard or seen him, it fell still and silent too, and almost made him think it wasn't there after all...

...until he resumed his trek, at which point all those subtle signs returned.

Why was it hiding from him? If this creature was so big, so smart, then it must have known it was more than a match for Lorenzo in his current condition. Unless...

The only thing that makes sense. It has to be... No, it can't be!

Unless the creature was tired and hurt too, too weak to risk a full-frontal assault and yet so stubborn, bloody-minded, that it couldn't bring itself to abandon the hunt. Unless it had been compelled to change its tactics, to watch and wait for the moment of maximum advantage, for its prey to make a mistake. Unless...

He didn't have far to go now. Ashmadia Tower was little more than an hour away. If Lorenzo could grit his teeth and ignore the throbbing pain in his leg, if he could concentrate for just that short time, sort the real threats from the imaginary ones, if he could keep up a good enough front that his pursuer might think it not worth engaging him and a brisk enough pace that it couldn't reach him anyway... if Lorenzo could do all that, and if in addition he didn't run into any more surprises... maybe then, just maybe, even though he had failed this

test, he could at least survive it.

He cursed himself for his pride, for having allowed it to lead him to here. Why had he had to confront Creek? Why hadn't he been content with domestic duties, until he was ready for more? So most of his friends had been shipped out already; so he'd feared what people would say about him if he was kept behind... They would say those things anyway, now. Creek had been right about him all along, he thought. No fire. He must have pitted him against that Devil in order to prove that very point. He would probably be glad to be rid of an under-achieving trooper.

Something shifted beneath Lorenzo's foot—and he could almost have wept as he realised what he'd done: allowed his mind to wander again, let his gaze lose focus. Blundered into a mantrap, a full six paces across. It had felt his weight, and its edges were already curling, about to snap shut. He tried to leap from it, but too late, and he was far, far too slow.

The plant swallowed his trailing right leg, pain slicing through him as its teeth dug into his wounded thigh. It was all Lorenzo could do to keep from being yanked off his remaining foot. Almost reflexively, he wielded his fang and began to cut through the mantrap's tough outer shell: he knew from experience that he could free himself before it could digest much more than his trouser leg and the top layer of his skin—under normal circumstances, that was.

His stalker was no longer trying to hide.

The Catachan Devil was suddenly, shockingly, *there*, as if its shape had formed out of the trees themselves, and it was barrelling towards him with a cry that was half-roar, half-screech, and this time he couldn't dodge it, couldn't run from it. It pounced on Lorenzo, knocking him backwards so his left foot floundered in the air and only the mantrap's hold on his right leg kept him from falling. He was watching for its tail, knowing that off-balance as he was he wouldn't be able to avoid it this time—and a claw slipped by his defences and clamped itself to his right arm, numbing his fingers so he could no longer feel his fang though he clung to it doggedly.

The other claw came for him, and he twisted his left arm out of its path but could do no more than that. The claw bit into his ribs, puncturing the skin, and Lorenzo knew he had only a second to live, that the Devil was about to rend him apart.

With his left, free hand, he was still clutching spiker thorns. It was all he could do to thrust them in his attacker's direction, the whole bundle, but somehow he got lucky. He had expected their points to snap against armour; instead, they pierced something soft. And the Catachan Devil howled. It actually

howled.

Its claws flopped open, and it reared away from him, Lorenzo managing to give the thorns one last, savage twist before they were ripped from his hand.

It was only now that he got a good look at his foe, really took in what he was seeing—as it writhed in pain, its head down, its many legs twitching and thrashing.

It was injured—badly so. There was certainly no doubt that, when Lorenzo’s barking toad bomb had gone off, the Devil had been at ground zero. Toad poison had eaten into its carapace, apparently causing whole patches of it to melt, to be sloughed off like an old skin. It was through one such hole that Lorenzo had been able to strike, and his spiker thorns still protruded from it, heads buried in the leathern, dark flesh beneath. They had drawn blood: thick, black, vinegar-stinking Catachan Devil blood. He didn’t think he had seen that before.

The poison had gotten into one of the Devil’s eyes, causing it to distend, to run like a half-fried egg—and a number of its legs were also mottled and twisted, some tapering to fused stumps. Its tail seemed intact but badly burnt, and it trailed across the ground limply as if its nerves had been destroyed—which, Lorenzo thought, would explain why the Devil hadn’t employed it against him this time.

It could only have been a few knife thrusts away from death. He had done that to it. And he could finish the job right now. He could take it.

If only he could reach it.

The Devil was visibly rallying, throwing off the effects of this latest dose of venom. By the time he could escape the mantrap’s embrace, Lorenzo knew it would be on him again, back in a position of strength. But the force of the Devil’s attack had had an unintended consequence; its feet had churned up mud, exposed the plant’s roots and hacked into them, weakening them. The mantrap’s hold on Lorenzo remained firm; its hold on the earth was less so.

His hands trembling, he put his blade to work in a sawing action, weakening that hold further, his own tiredness forgotten in the adrenaline high of the moment. First one green strand and then two more parted, but the shape of the Devil was always lurking in his peripheral vision—and as it began to recover its composure, to draw itself up to its full height again, Lorenzo knew that, ready or not, he had to act now.

He threw himself at the creature, his right arm fully extended, pulling the mantrap after him, elated as its roots clung and strained and tore and gave just—*just*—enough for him to be able to drive his fang, his still poison-tipped fang,

into the Devil's gaping mouth. It roared again, struck out blindly, caught the side of Lorenzo's head and almost snapped his neck with the force of the blow.

For a second he couldn't see anything, just black stars exploding. Then he blinked away his dizziness, and he saw the Catachan Devil looming over him...

...for a second, then it let out an agonised shudder and its legs splayed out beneath it and, with a resounding crash, it flopped onto its stomach.

Lorenzo leapt onto its back, found an exposed patch of flesh and focused all his attention upon that, upon bringing his knife arm up, down, up, down, stabbing away and just praying he could dig his way down to something vital. A claw came grasping for him, but he batted it away and he kept on cutting, cutting, cutting, establishing a mechanical rhythm until there was nothing left in the world but him and the slab of warm meat beneath him and his fang and the black blood in which he was steadily becoming coated, and he wasn't even sure the Devil was alive, didn't dare stop to check, but he knew he had beaten it. He could taste his victory.

And then all he could taste was mud, because the Devil had found a last vestige of strength and it had bucked and thrown him, and he tried to stand but he could feel the mantrap on his leg reasserting itself, and he let out a scream of frustration as he was dragged away from his nemesis, watched it slip through his fingers.

Then it was gone, swallowed by the surrounding jungle as quickly as it had emerged from it, and Lorenzo was alone and bloodied and caked in dirt and his trapped right leg was stinging, and he hammered his fists into the ground and he screamed out again and again, because he had been so close this time, so close to achieving what he had once thought impossible.

So close. Not quite close enough.

When Lorenzo came round...

He was lying on his back in a clean, white bed, staring up at bright lights in a black ceiling, and the first thing that rushed back to him was a feeling of shame. They must have carried him into the Tower, Creek's men, after he had... had...

He was starting to remember, through a fog of confusion: half-walking, half-crawling, dragging himself across the tree line, and Creek had been there... hadn't he?... and Lorenzo had been determined to meet him on his feet, to look him square in his black eyes, but he'd been too weak...

He was not alone.

His heart leapt at the realisation, and he scrambled onto his elbows, tried to

sit to attention, but he couldn't quite make it. He felt nauseous—anti-plague drugs, he guessed—and he could taste the chalky residue of water tablets on his tongue.

Sergeant “Barracuda” Creek patted him on the shoulder in a curiously paternal manner. “Easy there, trooper,” the old soldier growled, “you’ve had a tough time of it, so I hear; it cost us three cans of synth-skin just to fix up that leg of yours.”

“I... I almost had it, sergeant,” he stammered. “I was so close, but it ran from me and I couldn’t... Let me try again. Next year. I can train harder, *try* harder.”

“You know the problem you’ve caused me, don’t you? The mess you made of that Devil—I hear it’s cowering in its den right now, gonna be laid up a whole lot longer’n you are. Means I’ll have to break in a brand new critter for the next initiation test.”

“One more try,” Lorenzo pleaded. “I can beat it next time. I know I can.”

“I don’t think you’re hearing me, trooper,” said Creek. “I wasn’t too sure about you, didn’t think you were ready to go off-world, not yet. But you did a good job out there. Real good. In fact, a whole better’n most. In the long run.”

Lorenzo tried to say something, but no words came out. He didn’t dare *let* the words out, didn’t dare believe what he thought he was hearing.

“What,” said Creek, his lips curling to expose a row of small, pointed teeth, “you thought you had to kill that thing? I wouldn’t have expected that from a vet, let alone from a newbie. You didn’t have to kill the Devil, Lorenzo. You just had to survive.”

And then the half-smile faded, and Creek straightened up, very much the dour, brusque military man of a few days earlier again. “You ship out in seventy-two hours,” he barked. “The medics say you’ll be fit by then, or I’ll want to know the reason why. You’re going to war now, Trooper Lorenzo—and if you think I’ve been tough on you... well, let’s just see how you cope with a real challenge!”

