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GONE FOR A SOLDIER
WILLIAM KING
A MACHARIAN CRUSADE SHORT STORY

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GONE FOR A SOLDIER

William King

That night our lives changed utterly. If I close my eyes I can still picture it perfectly: the winter-cold street the hundred-storey tenement blocks rising all around us, the flickering gaslights, the crunch of soot-stained snow beneath our boots. We crossed Stormspike Span where it leapt across the thousand-foot drop between the Factory Sector and the Forgemarket and emerged onto the deck of Urban Level Twelve. In the distance, as far as the eye could see, enormous towers and chimneys rose into the night and over everything, belching sparks and flames, loomed the sky-tall smokestack of Murdstone's Forge.

The cold numbed my face. A snowflake gave up its chemical tang on my tongue. Anton danced around us, waving his fists and squaring up to Ivan in a clownish fashion. He was full of mad chatter as usual, talking about how the Adeptus Astartes were the greatest heroes of humanity, had superhuman powers and lived for thousands of years. He was convinced that if you were brave enough, loyal enough and prayed hard enough, you too could become a Space Marine.

If any of that had been true poor Anton would have achieved his ambition and some of the rest of us might have too. We certainly thought it was possible then but we were young and had never seen anything except what existed beneath the dull, polluted sky of Belial. We didn't know any better.

Ivan was a quiet, serious boy, tall and muscular with a long face and dark curly

hair. He carried himself with the poise of up-and-coming pit-boxer. He dreamed of getting away from the grind of the factory, of making his fortune beating out the brains of others for the pleasure of the rich who came down to the pits at Judson's Maze. When he was rich, he said, he would open a gin-house and we could have free drink and food whenever we liked. He was a generous boy, and to us, constantly hungry and constantly poor, it sounded like a vision of heaven.

In the few hours he had after work he practised in the gymnasium on Hyde Street along with all the other would-be pit fighters and some of the hard boys of our neighbourhood. Even then he was not a lad you messed with - well, not more than once. He was quick with his hands and fast with his feet and when he hit you, you felt as if you had been struck by one of the great descending pistons in the cog-house of the factory. I sparred with him a few times. It was a mistake I did my best not to repeat when I got older and a little wiser.

That night Ivan planned to graft on his kicks and punches and Anton and I were simply killing time. We did not want to go back to the tiny apartments we shared with our families and throw ourselves down on our pallets and wake up muscles aching to go back to work the next day. The street was our best and only entertainment and you never knew who you might run into if you hung out there long enough.

If we had known what was going to happen we would have run home and locked the doors and windows and counted ourselves lucky, but we didn't and thus our lives were altered, Macharius was saved, and the Imperium still exists in this part of our dark and terrible galaxy.

'What was that?' Anton asked. We had all heard the noise but I was pretending I had not. It was a scream and the sounds of someone in pain as well as low gruff voices speaking with menace. It had come from a side alley between the huge buildings. Overturned waste bins lay everywhere. Rats as big as dogs scuttled away in panic, chittering to each other in their strange, sub-human language. They wanted no more to do with this than I did.

A voice called out for someone to stop. I recognised it. So did the others. I could tell from the look on their faces. It belonged to old Citizen Chiltern, who lived on the same floor of our building with his sick wife. I looked at Ivan. Ivan looked at me. Anton's head scanned from side to side as if he could not decide who he was going to look at. Without another word, Ivan strode into the alley, through the clouds of condensation vented through the grille of the sub-deck thermal system. Anton followed him.

I glanced up and down the street. It had become suddenly and mysteriously empty. Windows were shuttered, doors slammed. I took a deep breath and followed my friends, much against my better judgement.

Citizen Chiltern lay in the ash-tainted snow. Two large men in heavy overcoats were kicking him. Ivan already had his hands on the shoulders of one of them.

'Stop,' he said.

The biggest man turned and looked at him. He had a broken nose and a face as pock-marked as the surface of a mining asteroid. 'Go away, nadhead,' he said. 'This is none of your business.'

'Leave him alone,' Ivan said. 'Leave Citizen Chiltern alone. I know him.'

The big man reached out to shove Ivan away. Ivan's left hand flicked out. It looked as if he had only stroked the big man's face but the leg-breaker fell to the ground, blood erupting from his nose.

'What the hell?' said his companion.

Ivan didn't wait. His right hand hit the man in his stomach, doubling him over. Ivan's knee came up to meet the bruiser's descending chin. No sooner had the second man fallen than Anton was on him, hands round his throat, starting to bang his head on the snowy pavement. If I had not dragged him off, I have no doubt he would have carried on doing it until the leg-breaker's skull was broken.

It took all of my strength to restrain Anton, who seemed just as willing to fight with me as with the strangers. He was a skinny kid but wiry, and if I had not got the drop on him and held him from behind, things would have gone badly for me.

Ivan just stood there, watchful but ready. His face was pale. It was starting to dawn on him what he had done. His punches had been reflexive. You don't swing on a conditioned fighter like Ivan without getting that automatic response. I know that now myself, although it took months of hand-to-hand combat training to make me that way.

The first of the leg-breakers was helping his friend to his feet. He turned and glared at us. 'You boys are in trouble *now*,' was all he said. I did not doubt it for a moment. His small eyes flickered.

His gaze took in all of our faces as though memorising them, and instinctively I turned away. I tried to make it look as if I was getting ready to help Citizen Chiltern but really all I was doing was trying to escape notice.

'If Leo lets me go, I'll show you who is in trouble,' shouted Anton. I cursed him under my breath for mentioning my name. The leg-breakers were already moving away up the alley. One of them was limping, the other clutching his

head. Ivan stood there still as a statue, watching them vanish into the vented cloud. Anton raved threats. I told him to calm down. I might as well have ordered him to spread his arms and fly to the smaller moon for all the good it did. Once I was certain the thugs were long gone, I released Anton and bent down to help Citizen Chiltern up. Anton raced to the mouth of the alley, shouting. 'That's right, run!'

I knew he was just compounding our mistake. Citizen Chiltern looked even older and slower than usual. His hair was lank. His face was bruised. One eye was already swollen shut. He moved painfully to his feet, trying to push himself up with his good hand.

'You should not have done that, boys,' he said. 'Those were Cleaver's men.'

The words made my mouth go dry. All strength drained from my limbs. Ivan shrugged. I could tell he was thinking that it was too late to do anything about it now.

'What do they want with you?' I asked. 'You're nothing to Cleaver.'

'I borrowed money from Little Tobey. My wife needed medicine and I haven't worked since my hand got crushed in the pressing machine.' The old man sounded almost apologetic. He looked guilty too, as if he was the one who had been caught committing a crime. 'You should have asked me,' Ivan said. 'I would have got it for you.' If Ivan was capable of this, it was news to me. As far as I knew he was as broke as the rest of us.

'I couldn't do that, lad,' said Citizen Chiltern. I didn't need to ask why. He was too proud to beg from the people in his own building. Not too proud to visit our local loan shark, though. He glanced at me and something in my sour expression must have told him what I was thinking. 'I already pawned everything I could,' he said. Anton had returned now. He looked calmer. His face was a little pale. He had heard the bit about the leg-breakers being Cleaver's men. 'I'm not scared,' he said although no one had said he was.

'I am,' said Ivan, 'I've heard what Cleaver does to people who cross him.'

We all had. Vivid images swum up through my mind. As fast as I forced them down, they found a new way to escape.

'Come on,' I said to Citizen Chiltern. 'Let's get you home.'

The old man looked at some broken alembics scattered on the ground nearby. He bent over again and began to pick up paper packets with alchemical runes on them.

'Medicine,' he said. 'For my wife. She's not very well.'

'You did what?' My father never raised his voice when he was angry. He just got quieter. His jaw grew tight and a small, savage smile twisted the corners of his lips upward. He looked as if he wanted to hit me again. I kept my hands up instinctively, ready to block any punch.

'I did not mean to,' I said, aware that I sounded like a child about to be punished, my voice high and thin as I strained to force the words out. I paused, took a breath and started again, pitching my voice lower this time and speaking as slowly and distinctively as my father did when he was angry. 'The man swung at Ivan, Ivan hit him and then he hit the other one and then Anton jumped in. What was I supposed to do?'

My father shook his head and made a small tut-tutting sound.

He let out a long breath and looked at the ceiling. I knew he was counting to ten, and placing a short prayer to the Emperor between every number of the count. When he had finished, his hands were unclenched and he slumped down in the room's one battered chair. He looked old and grey and tired in the one flickering gaslight of the small room.

'They could have been armed,' he said. 'They could have been carrying...'

My father knew about such things. The small income he made by doing odd-jobs around the Forgemarket was squandered on gambling at clip joints owned by Cleaver, or more rarely blown on binges in Cleaver's gin palaces. In his youth, which he only ever talked about when he was very drunk, he had run with a gang. They had done some pretty wild things, if you believed his stories, which I did.

'But they weren't.'

'You can bet the next bunch will be. And you won't outnumber them either.'

'I already worked that out for myself,' I said. 'You are not helping.'

'Clever boy,' he said. It was his customary sneer and a particularly stupid one, for he was a clever man himself. Maybe that was what made him bitter. There was no benefit to being clever in the bad alleys of the Forgemarket. It only left you aware of how trappy you were. 'Always such a clever boy.'

'What's done is done,' I said. 'There's nothing I can do about it.' It was the fatalism of the Forgemarket speaking. We had made one small stupid mistake, let our guards down for one fatal instant, stuck our noses into a place where they should not have been and we were going to have to pay for it. I knew it. My father knew. Ivan knew it. Possibly only Anton didn't know it, and even he suspected. My father fell silent and stared at the small cold gas fire that did not heat our room. The gas had been cut off a few days before and I was not sure

whether it was because he had gambled away the money to pay for it or it was simply one of the regular interruptions of service. They were becoming more and more common.

A roach the size of my hand sauntered along the cluster of pipes that ran across the ceiling corner before vanishing through the hole in the wall where the pipes left our room and ran into the neighbours.

I pulled my patched coat tighter around me and listened to the sounds of our building settling down to sleep. A dozen people were still outside waiting to use the shared lavatory. The babies in the room next door had finally stopped crying. My father got up and pulled his bed out of the wall. I lay down on the mat beside the cold fire and gazed up at the icon of Saint Aganostes that my mother had left. He was bowing down before the throne on which the Emperor lived out his death in life, a halo blazing around his head while the spirits of the primarchs looked down. I have since found out that it would be considered a heretical image by most of the Ecclesiarchy, but at the time it seemed to me to be the very incarnation of piety.

Sleep was a long time coming. I lay shivering, not sure whether it was the winter chill or fear. My thoughts kept turning to the thing that my father kept in the locked box hidden below the creaky floor-blocks. I was wondering whether I was going to have to steal it.

I suppose even then I had the beginnings of a plan. It gathered itself in the small dark corners of my mind, hiding there because it was too scary for me to contemplate openly yet.

'What are we going to do?' Anton asked. He was not dancing around now. He was not squaring up to anybody. He looked as subdued as I had ever seen him and I realised then exactly how bad things were. Even Anton was frightened. People stared at us in the crowded vestibule. A few of them even looked at us admiringly. Word of what we had done had got around. That was bad. It meant Cleaver would have to do something. His power was based on fear. He could not be seen to be defied by anybody.

'I don't know,' said Ivan. He was looking at me for some cue. I was the clever one. I was the one who was supposed to figure out how to make things right. I did not have the heart to tell him that I could not see any way out of this. I pushed through the great swing doors, wanting to get away from all of those accusing gazes. The cold slapped me in the face. My breath came out in great clouds I glanced around the street. It was the usual scene on a usual morning.

Thousands of workers trudged through the polluted snow. The same giant figures of Imperial heroes looked down on us from every junction, statues carved in a richer age to celebrate the Guardsmen who had defended our world in the Imperium's countless wars. A train whizzed past overhead, visible for a moment through the dirt-smeared plexiglass sides of the pneumatic tube along which it rushed. It all looked so normal. There was no sign that the world had changed. Whatever threats there were out there, they were not visible.

Anton gestured at the giant recruiting poster pasted to the walls of the tenement. It showed a uniformed Guardsman staring heroically towards the distant horizon. If you are of a certain age and from Belial, you probably know it. At that time, they adorned every street. 'We could join the Guard,' Anton said. 'Become Space Marines.'

'Would you shut up about that?' I said. Anton had been going on at us for years to join the Imperial Guard. It was his dream. He produced the book from a pocket in his overalls. It was tatty and dog eared and its cover was missing. He held it with the same reverence as people hold their prayer books in the cathedral. I suppose for him it was a sort of sacred object although, looking at it, most would only have seen a cheap propaganda novel of the sort the planetary government printed and distributed in millions. Anton must have read that book a hundred times. It was amazing. He could barely read a technical manual, his lips moved and he had to follow the ideograms with his finger, but he kept going back to that one stupid storybook.

'No! We could join the Guard and we could become Space Marines. Cleaver would not dare touch us then.'

I could see how much the idea appealed to him, to us all, I suppose if I am honest. He loved the idea that he could be transformed into someone else, someone powerful, someone who mattered. Being beyond the reach of the likes of Cleaver was as potent a dream as his head could hold without exploding.

'And how are we supposed to achieve this before Cleaver's boys find us?' I sneered. I spoke so loudly that heads turned to look at us and a space cleared around. It was as if I had suddenly revealed we all had some vile contagious disease 'Easy,' said Anton. 'We go to the recruiting office, sign the papers, and take the Emperor's oath.'

'What about our indentures to the Machine Guild?' I asked. 'They don't like it if you break contract'

'The Guard are always looking for volunteers and they ask no questions. They don't care if you have a contract with the guild. They don't care if you are wanted

by the Arbites. And people say you do better if you step forward of your own free will and not wait for your number to come up in the Conscription Quota Lottery.'

'He has a point, you know,' said Ivan quietly.

'Not you too,' I said. 'You want to go for a soldier?'

'Why not? It beats waiting here to have our hands chopped off,' Anton said.

The entrance of the factory was coming closer. I could see the security guards with their guns and their badges standing beneath the huge, age-blurred statues of Industry and Production that flanked the iron railings of the gates. They made me feel a bit safer. Not even a maniac like Cleaver would do anything to us while we were at work. Messing with the Machine Guild was a death sentence even for the likes of him. They took the defence of their property and the free flow of their goods very seriously. Just ask the cultists who tried to start a union - if you can find them. Start your search at the bottom of the sump pools. That is where you will most likely find the bodies.

I looked at them as I would look at any other pair of idiots who tried to talk me into signing my own death warrant. 'Because it's not like in Anton's book.' Even today I am quite proud of the amount of venom I managed to work into the word *book*. 'In the Guard the Emperor's enemies shoot at you with real bolter shells and real las-beams and no one survives those heroic last stands Anton likes to go on about.'

'How would you know?' Anton asked. 'Have you ever been at one?'

It was a fair question and he was asking it honestly. 'Have you ever met anybody who survived one?'

Anton shrugged. 'They are all off-planet. Or they are Space Marines.'

He said that the way he would have said they had gone to heaven.

'Open your eyes, Anton,' I said. 'Where do you think the limbless beggars you see on every street comer come from? Where do you think Harry No-Legs mislaid his kneecaps? And they are the lucky ones. Ask them! I have.'

'So you like to talk to beggars who can tell a good story,' Anton said.

'And you like to read idiotic prop-novs,' I said. 'No - let me rephrase that - the same idiotic prop-nov over and over again.'

'It's not idiotic,' Anton said. He sounded genuinely hurt but I was too angry and too scared to feel much guilt. The masked guards looked at us and we punched in. Under their hard stares we fell silent and suited up and got to work at the sirens' first blast.

We donned our heavy rhino-beetle carapace work clothes, our metal masks with

their crystal visors and huge insulated gauntlets, and strode out onto the oil-stained floor of the factory. Back then it was the Great Pre-Macharian Depression. The machines upon which Belial's industry depended were running down from lack of off-world parts. We were reduced to hand-crafting servo-mechanisms to replace them, not all of which functioned as they should. We did our best to duplicate the products of men who had known what they were doing on a distant planet hundreds of years before. The results, as you might imagine, were not very good. Machines that had, according to my father, worked unceasingly for centuries needed to be repaired every few weeks and there were so many of them that we were kept constantly busy at our work benches beneath the great flame-belching blast furnaces.

We worked amid the clatter and boom of the great factory. It left us too much time with our own dark thoughts.

It did not take long for Cleaver to track us down. They came after our double shift at the factory finished. We were walking across Stormspike Span when a massive groundcar swung up beside us and a dozen big men leapt out. Before we knew it the three of us were pinned against the wall of the bridge, a thousand-foot drop behind us, held in grips that not even Ivan could break. I looked around and again the street had mysteriously emptied.

Only then did Little Tobey get out of the groundcar. He was shorter than his men, broader and heavier, and not all of that was fat. He had the face of an overweight bird of prey - huge jowls, hooked nose, cold, flinty eyes. A fine fur of hair covered his bullet head. He looked at us with an expression that I found merely frightening because I did not then understand it. I do now. It was the look of a very, very hard man sent to do a job that embarrassed him and that he did not really want.

He punched the palm of his left hand with the fist of his right. It made the sound of a face being slapped very hard. It was somehow more frightening than if he really had slapped one of us. There was a sense of restraint, of controlled violence about it. He was letting us know what he could do, rather than doing it.

'Well, boys,' he said, 'you've caused me a little problem.' His voice was a low growl. You had to strain to hear him and you did because you knew that if you missed what he had to say something terrible might happen. It was an effective trick. I've known commissars since who used the same one but none of them did it better than Little Tobey. He would have made a fine commissar.

The flinty eyes sized us up. He wanted us to be in no doubt that he was a man

who solved the little problems that came his way. None of us said anything. I would have apologised but my mouth was too dry to get the words out. I wriggled a little but the heavy hands holding me in place pushed me back against the wall with irresistible force.

'Yes,' he said. 'You have. You interfered with a collection and you embarrassed a couple of my boys.'

I looked around to see if I could see the men Ivan had dropped. They were not there. Little Tobey was a good enough manager to make sure of that. If they had been, tempers would have run high and things might have got out of control, and he was not a man who liked to have that happen.

He walked up and down in front of us and looked at each of us in turn. Anton and Ivan met his gaze. I struggled to hold it for a few heartbeats and then looked away. Tobey shook his head with theatrical sadness. He was close enough that I could smell the wave of cologne displaced through the air.

'What am I going to do with you three?' he asked with the air of a parent confronting wayward children. He exhaled and his breath formed a small cloud in the cold air. He took out a tube of violet-scented breath-fresheners and popped half the roll into his mouth, crunching them with his metal teeth. It should have been ridiculous. Instead it was terrifying, like watching a great carnivore nibble a morsel of flesh while it considers eating you.

'I hear you are a fighter,' he said. A sausage-like finger jabbed out at Ivan's chest.

Ivan nodded.

'It's a hard thing to fight when you've had your hand fed into a meat-grinding machine.'

There was nothing anybody could say to that. We all knew he was not discussing a fanciful situation. 'My boss likes to do that. I mean he enjoys it. It gives him real pleasure,' Little Tobey said. He sounded thoughtful now, as a man is likely to be when considering the foibles of an employer. 'If I took the three of you to him now, what do you think he would do to you all?'

He looked at us all again, giving us ample chance to consider the answer. After a silence that went on for far too long he said, 'I think we all know the answer.'

It dawned on me that he had only asked the question because he did not intend to do that. Looking at the others I could see I was the only one who realised this.

'What... what are you going to do?' It took me a huge effort to force the words out. The fact the effort was visible made me feel humiliated and I think planted small seeds of murder in my heart. I became aware that along with the fear,

somewhere, buried very deep was a burning rage I suspected the two were related.

'I was told you were quick,' said Tobey. 'Seems I was told right. Here's how it is... You made some of my boys look bad. But you're quick, likely lads - hard too - and I would hate to see that talent go to waste. You collect the money for me from Chiltern and I will *see* what I can do with the Cleaver. And when I say 'collect' I mean make an example of. I want them dropped down a lift-shaft. Chiltern and his wife. Do it and we'll talk. Don't and...!' He raised his right arm. He had withdrawn his hand into his sleeve of his very fine coat so it was no longer visible. It looked like he was clowning. Nobody laughed. 'You've got till tomorrow morning.'

He clapped his hands. His boys let us go and before we had time to react, they had withdrawn into the big groundcar and swept away. Ivan stood there shaking his head. Anton was throwing up into the snow. I stood and watched the groundcar sweep off. I knew that it was taking my whole future with it.

'What are we going to do?' Anton asked. He was paler than the tainted snow. We stood in the vestibule of the tenement. It was warmer than my apartment would be and I did not want my father to overhear this discussion. If he was even there, which was not at all certain.

'I don't know,' I said.

'We could be part of Cleaver's gang,' Anton said. I could see he was turning the idea over in his mind and that it appealed to some part of him.

'You going to be the one to drop old Chiltern and his missus down the elevator shaft?' Ivan asked. 'I'm not.'

He had a deep stubborn streak in him, even as a boy. Some might have said a self-destructive one too. I am in two minds about that myself.

'It's them or us,' said Anton. He was trying to sound vicious but he ended up sounding merely pathetic.

'You think a Space Marine would do that?' Ivan asked.

Anton looked ashamed.

'We're not going to get to be part of the Cleaver's mob, idiot boy,' I said. That got both of their attentions.

'You've already worked it out, have you?' Anton asked. He sounded like my father accusing me of being a clever boy.

'It's not about recruiting us. It's about power. It's about them showing they can make us do what they want.'

'Well, they can, can't they?' Anton said.

'Look, we do over Chiltern and his wife and we've done a first-degree murder. They don't have to kill us. They can hand us over to the Arbites and they'll execute us for them.'

Even as I said the words I knew I was right. It was brilliant in its way. The long arm of the law would be seen to do Cleaver's work for him. It would make it look as if the judges were in collusion with the gangs, and everyone would be even more afraid of going to the law than they were now.

'If we don't,' Anton said. He raised his arm with the hand withdrawn into the sleeve just as Tobey had done. 'It might be better.'

'I'm not doing it,' Ivan said.

'Simple as that?' I said. To tell the truth, I admired him more than I could find the words to say in that moment. I resented him just as much. That's the way with heroes. They really rub your nose in your own inadequacy. It was all very easy for him.

'Simple as that,' he said. 'Good night.'

He turned on his heel and walked away towards the tiny apartment he shared with his aunt and his cousins. Anton looked at me. There was a shifty expression on his face. His hands were balled up tight, his shoulders hunched forward. Something cold glittered in his eyes.

'Well, Leo,' he said, 'it looks like it's up to you and me.'

We banged on the door of Chiltern's apartment and heard the old man's slow shuffling steps coming closer through the thin plas-fibre. Anton looked at me, a tight grin pasted on his mouth, his eyes narrowed, his pupils pin-sharp. I heard Chiltern breathing as he put his eye to the security-socket and inspected us. A moment later, chains rattled and the door opened.

'It's you boys,' he said. The relief in his voice was evident. All of us knew who he was expecting. 'Come in, citizens.'

We did, and a bunch of people passing on the way to their own chambers saw us do it. Whatever happened, they would remember. There would be witnesses for the Arbites to question.

Chiltern's wife lay on a bed, wrapped in blankets that had the sickly sweet smell of age and illness and death. An old mechanical clock, obviously their most treasured possession, ticked the hours and minutes of the old woman's dying loudly away in the corner. The old man turned his back on us. Anton nudged me with his elbow. I don't know what he expected me to do - produce a cosh and

bludgeon the old man on the back of the head perhaps.

'It's Anton and Leo, dear,' Old Chiltern said. 'Two of the boys who helped me last night. I was telling you about them.'

The old woman raised herself painfully up on her elbow and blinked at us. Her breathing was raspy and loud. It sounded like her lungs were filled with phlegm. The thought sauntered sideways into my head that she did not have much time left anyway.

It would be a mercy to put her out of her misery.

'You boys are very brave,' she said. 'Fighting off those robbers like that.'

So Chiltern had not told her who the robbers really were or why they were attacking him. He stared at us with entreaty in his eyes, silently pleading for us not to share the information. He wanted her to die in peace. I gave a slight nod. He looked pathetically grateful. I hated him in that moment for being so weak and so kind and so thoughtful.

Chiltern had made his way over to the corner where the sink and an ancient cooking burner stood. A small loaf of bread and a carton of protein paste was on a plate. There was one small chipped cup. He picked up the bread and paste, brought it over, and handed it to Anton. For a moment, I feared he would brain the old man with it. Chiltern went back and got his glass. There was some murky cold tea in it. 'It's not much but it's all we can offer you,' he said.

Anton's face wore a ghastly grin now and he kept nodding and winking at me. I realised that confronted with the reality of dragging this pair of geriatrics to the lift shaft and tossing them down, he was stumped. He could not bring himself to do it. He wanted me to.

'What do you boys want?' Chiltern asked. He obviously had picked up something of the strangeness of the situation. There was a worried note in his voice. 'You're not in any trouble, are you?'

And if we were what could you do about it, old man? I wanted to ask. Instead I said, 'We just wanted to make sure you were all right.' I was surprised at how smoothly the lie came out. Somewhere, somehow, a decision had been made. The cold little monster that had come up with my plan was getting ready to step out of the shadows.

'Yes, that's right,' said Anton. 'That's what we wanted. We brought you some food.' He produced an old paper package of sweets from his pocket and tried to thrust them at the old man, who refused.

'That's very kind of you, boys,' the old lady said. 'But we don't need anything, do we, Albert?'

The old man nodded. We stood there in uncomfortable silence for a few moments and then I said, 'Well then, we had best be going.'

'Come again, any time, boys,' they said in unison and then laughed. I knew that the next knock on the door they got would not be coming from us. Old Man Chiltern knew it too. Maybe he even understood the real reason why we had come. As he saw us out he said, 'I am grateful lads, for everything.'

Or maybe that is just my imagination. 'Good night, citizen,' I said.

'That could have gone better,' said Anton as we stood beneath the flickering gaslight in the corridor again.

'No it couldn't have,' I said. 'It went just fine.'

'You have a plan?'

'Go home, pack your stuff,' I said. 'Tomorrow we go to the recruiting office.'

He let out a long whoop. He looked as pleased as if I had told him we were off for a night at the penny theatre followed by a session at Mama Kraven's Kathouse. Anton raced off delighted, without even saying goodnight.

I made my way back to our own apartment. I had a suspicion that things were not going to work out quite that smoothly. They never did in the Forgemarket.

My father was not in when I got home. Doubtless he was out on a spree. It was his usual response to a crisis. In a way it made me sad - I was not going to get a chance to say goodbye before I left forever. He was my one piece of blood kin and whatever else he was, he was my father. In a way, I was glad too, for it made what I was going to do easier. I found the hidden key taped to the underside of the chair. I went over to the loose block of plascrete in the floor and levered it up. Much to my relief the box was where my father had left it I opened it with the key and took out the contents, which were wrapped in protective oilcloth.

I unwrapped it slowly and carefully just as I had seen him do when I was a little boy and he thought I was asleep. It was an old laspistol, the weapon my father had carried in his gang-boy youth. The metal felt heavy and cold as death in my hand. My fingers closed on the grip and I raised it to eye-level and sighted along it, just as you see small boys do when they are playing orks and Guardsmen in the street. The difference was that I held a real gun in my hand for the first time in my life. It made me feel strong yet at the same time vulnerable and crazy. I had this odd feeling like I could not trust myself with it, that I might do something mad, like those killers who go on murder sprees in the Underhive warrens.

Just feeling the trigger under my finger made my heart beat faster and my

breathing shallow. I could imagine getting Little Tobey or the pock-faced leg-breaker in my sights and burning them down where they stood.

I laughed softly. The gun was old and I did not even know if it would work. I hit the small circular button near my thumb. The weapon vibrated slightly. An indicator on the back of the handle blinked green, indicating the power cell still held a charge. I knew all that from reading prop-novs, just as I knew what to do next. If it seems unusual to you that an untrained boy could get a gun to work so easily, just remember, those weapons were designed to be used by unlettered farm boys and the dregs of the Imperium's slums, or so a tech-priest once told me.

I ran my thumb over the power dial, moving it to the lowest setting. The roach was back. I took aim at it and pulled the trigger. I missed but the low intensity beam illuminated the room and scorched the piping. I moved it after the roach as it scuttled to escape death. The beam hit it and it burned, carapace exploding as its innards super-heated.

So the gun worked. I switched it off and put it inside my coat. I put the box back in its usual place and placed the plascrete block back on top of it I did not want my father stumbling over it if he came back drunk.

As it turned out there was no need to worry. He did not come back that night. Somehow, I managed to get some fitful sleep on the cold floor. When I woke it was dawn, time to be up and going. I packed my stuff and paused at the door to take one last look at the apartment. I suppose I knew I was never going to see it again. It was a strange feeling. I had lived all of my life up till that point in this one small cramped room and I did not like the idea of leaving my father without any idea of where I had gone. I did not know what to do. I had neither paper nor stylus to leave a message. I stood for a second undecided, lasgun weighing down my coat, half-empty duffel bag hanging from the other, then I knew what I had to do. I raised the weapon and burned my farewell onto the wall then I put the gun into my coat's deep pocket. I stepped through the door and locked it behind me and walked out into the corridor, certain I would never return.

Anton and Ivan were in the vestibule of the tenement. They too had half-empty kitbags. In the wan gas light there was something waxen about their faces and odd in their expressions. They did not look quite real. They looked nervous and very young.

'We are really going to do this?' Ivan said.

'Yes,' I said.

Anton let out a long whoop. We stepped through the doors. The big groundcar was there, and Little Tobey and a dozen of his bruisers. This time the two men Ivan had hit were with them. I felt like I had been punched in the stomach but I kept a smile plastered on my face.

'Good morning, boys,' Little Tobey said. 'It saddens me that you were not cleverer about this, it really does.'

He snapped his fingers. A wave of big men came towards us. I could see they were wearing knuckle-dusters and carrying claw hammers. They moved as if they did not expect any resistance. Feeling calmer than I ever had done in my life, I pulled my father's laspistol from my pocket and swept the barrel over the line of them. They stopped and stood frozen as if I had waved a magic wand. Beside me I heard Anton gasp.

The pock-faced man that had started all this said, 'You don't know how to use that thing. And even if you did, you don't have the nads to use it.'

I pulled the trigger. The beam glanced the edge of his arm. His overcoat caught fire and he rolled screaming in the snow, trying to put it out.

'I think you'll find I do,' I said. I pointed the weapon straight at Little Tobey, who was reaching inside his coat. 'Careful,' I said.

Ivan strode forward, reached inside the coat and pulled out a gun. 'I don't know what exactly you boys think you're doing but you're signing your own death warrants,' Tobey said.

'It's good that you are so concerned,' I said. 'But don't worry about us. Worry about yourself. Get in the car.'

Ivan held the door open and he and Tobey got in. Anton and I joined them. It was a limo. Inside, it felt like there was enough space to hold a party. 'Tell your driver to take us to the recruiting office,' I said.

Tobey did as he was told and the groundcar pulled smoothly away. Behind Tobey's head I watched the streets of the Forgemarket scroll by. It felt different. Inside the groundcar it was silent and we were as separate from the crowds going to work as if we were already aboard a spacecraft.

Anton looked pale. Ivan looked as if he might have been carved from stone. Little Tobey looked as relaxed as if he did not have a gun pointed at him. The whole time I kept waiting for him to try something. He probably could have, too.

I do not know how long it took us to drive to Imperial Plaza but we got there eventually. The groundcar pulled up in front of an enormous marbled tower. The Imperial eagle spread its wings over the gigantic entrance. Ivan opened the door and got out. We followed. Little Tobey rolled down the window and watched us

go. His face was bleak for a moment then he smiled and said, 'Good luck boys... and don't come back.'

We walked up the stairs and through the great doors of the recruitment office. As they swung shut behind us, I thought about the message I had left for my father burned into the walls of our apartment like the inscription etched on the head of a tombstone.

All it said was: *Gone for a soldier.*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

William King is the author of the Tyrion and Teclis saga, the Macharian Crusade trilogy as well as the much-loved Gotrek & Felix series and the Space Wolf novels. His short stories have appeared in many magazines and compilations, including *White Dwarf* and *Inferno!*. Bill was born in Stranraer, Scotland, in 1959 and currently lives in Prague.

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