STEVE LYONS

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The city had been lost a long time ago.

Its defenders, however, were still fighting to hold the ruins. Even though they knew – even though they always knew – their cause to be hopeless.

A young trooper crouched inside a half-demolished, brick-built turret.

He held the butt of a lasgun to his shoulder. Through its sights, he surveyed the toxic landscape that stretched out before him.

A ragged, wheezing wind swirled about the trooper’s shoulders, ashes dancing in its eddies. He could feel its sting even through his dark greatcoat and thick plates of carapace armour. Still, he showed no sign of discomfort, betrayed no weakness. He maintained his rigid, muscle-locked stance, his trigger finger poised. Waiting.

He had waited for an hour or longer now. Ever since the shattering thunderclaps of the siege engines had finally subsided. Ever since a deathly hush had settled upon this blasted wasteland.

Who could know what he was thinking?

The young trooper had no name. He had no need of one. Instead, he had a number stamped into a dog tag. A number that identified his combat unit and his place within it, and thus said everything there was to know about him.

‘This is it. We have confirmation that the enemy is on the move.’

The general’s voice: distant, echoing, metallic. The young trooper had to strain to catch the words. He was a long way from the nearest vox speaker, out here.

‘Stand fast. Remember your training. Remember your orders. You must be ready to meet your attackers with lethal force.’

The young trooper wore a facemask. It trapped the sound of his own breathing in his ears. He held his breath to focus on the general’s instructions.
His air was filtered through a chest unit, fed to him through the mask by a rubbery hose. Still, it left a bitter taste, a gritty texture on his tongue. He knew the air was likely killing him, in spite of his protective equipment.

Did he ever think about that? Did he dread the thought of flesh rotting from his bones, his internal organs liquefying?

If he did, then he might have consoled himself with another thought: that death by radiation was a slow and lingering death, and therefore one that he would almost certainly not live to experience.

They had classified this planet a ‘death world’ with good reason.

‘It has already been calculated that you cannot win this battle. That is not your objective. Your objective is to ensure that victory costs the enemy dearly.

‘The enemy’s resources far outweigh your own. For every second you stand against his guns, however, you deplete those resources. You make him weaker.

‘The price of this achievement, in return, is only that resource most abundantly available to us, most easily replenished. The price is that which is already the Emperor’s by rights. Praise be to our father, our guardian.

‘Today, you face defeat, at the small cost of your worthless lives. But die bravely, die hard, and your meagre sacrifice will help pave the way for His most glorious triumph in the future. Praise be to the Emperor!’

The stirring speech concluded with a tinny fanfare.

The young trooper could see them now. Rather, he could see a cloud of disturbed dust billowing along the horizon, presaging the enemy army’s advance. The angry growls of machine-spirits were carried to him on the ragged wind. Soon, for the first time in his short life, he would have to fight.

His first battlefield. Almost certainly his last.

The young trooper had been trained – more than that, he had been bred – to show no fear. Did that mean he didn’t feel it? He had been taught to ask no questions, but did that mean he didn’t wonder? Did he ponder the value of a human soul?

The city had been lost a long time ago. Millennia, in fact.

It had no worth of which the young trooper was aware, neither strategic nor mineral. He would die for it, all the same, because that was what he had been birthed to do. It was not only his duty, but his destiny.

And, after all, this city was home to him – in a way – although he had never
seen the sky above it before today. For uncountable generations, his people had fought and died here for the barren soil beneath his feet. Each serving the same intangible greater good, each seeking the redemption of this God-Emperor-damned world.

The young trooper’s home world. The only world he had ever known. A death world by the name of Krieg.

Elsewhere in the ruins, something had been woken by the percussion sounds of battle. Something that had slept for many nights and many days and ought to have been long-dead by rights. Something with barely enough strength left to lift its globular head. But it lifted its head, anyway, and strained with the muscles in its six half-wasted limbs to push its belly up off the ground. Dust and debris sloughed from the creature’s back as, inexorably, it hauled itself into a standing position.

It was dead. At least, as good as. Sustained only by an overwhelming biological imperative. A primordial need that wouldn’t grant the creature peace until it had been satisfied. The need to ensure the continuance of its genetic material.

The need to breed.

The attacking soldiers numbered in the low thousands.

They were preceded across the battlefield, and partially shielded, by lightly-armoured support vehicles. The young trooper made out six or seven of these. Not many, and from this distance they looked ancient, barely serviceable.

The vehicles’ turrets, however, were each manned and he had no reason at all to doubt that their pintle-mounted heavy stubbers were in working order.

It was the soldiers themselves, however, who presented the most fearsome sight, marching in step with backs straight and rifles shouldered, apparently heedless of the peril they were parading towards. As if they knew themselves to be invincible. Their faces were concealed by the gas masks they wore. Could it have been by chance that these lent them the appearance of hollow-eyed skulls, the symbol of death itself?

Of course, the soldiers were only men. The young trooper knew this, as well as anyone could. He had known these men, many of them, all his life. He had no way of telling, though, which ones he had grown up with, studied, trained
and been drilled alongside. Like him, these soldiers had no names. And no faces any longer.

Like a force of nature – an irresistible, implacable force – the Death Korps of Krieg bore down upon the young trooper’s lonely position.

‘Wait for it,’ the general’s vox-augmented voice cautioned. ‘Hold your fire until it can have the greatest possible effect. A shot fired too soon is a shot wasted.’

The young trooper had been bred to show no fear.

But most men would have fled or at least frozen in terror by now.

‘Far better to die with your weapon fully loaded than to empty it in vain. Your weapon can always be recovered and used again.’

The young trooper crouched inside his half-demolished, brick-built turret. He held the butt of his standard M35 lasgun to his shoulder. He betrayed no weakness. He maintained his rigid, muscle-locked stance, his trigger finger poised. Waiting.

A sound drew the creature’s attention. It snapped its globular head around sharply and probed the dusty gloom with its keen eyes.

A wall had fallen, only recently, bringing down a section of the ceiling with it. The rubble was still settling. And there was that sound again, loud in the dusty silence. The scraping of rock against rock. The sound of that rubble shifting.

There it was! The protruding shape of a gloved hand, twitching. The creature scuttled towards it, eagerly. It walked on two legs, but hunched over, using its two hands and two claws as well for improved speed and balance.

This was what it had been searching for, exactly what the creature needed. Life!

A human figure lay sprawled amid the wreckage, pinned by a roof beam across his chest. He had been struggling to free himself, but didn’t have the strength. He let out a low groan and fell still. He didn’t even react to the appearance of the creature looming over him. Had it not been so desperate…

The creature turned its keen eyes upon its prey. They were met by their own reflections in a pair of dark-tinted lenses. The fallen human’s eyes were hidden, so the creature couldn’t tell if it had made contact with its mesmerising gaze or not.
The human was unlikely to put up a struggle, anyway.

The creature’s tongue slavered in anticipation behind its fangs as it searched for a seam or a crack in the human’s armour, a vulnerable spot. The best point at which to strike in order to deliver its critical payload.

Had its mind been less addled, it would have known that its search was futile.

The creature’s prey didn’t have to struggle against it. It was enough that, at that moment, he released his final breath and died.

The creature couldn’t accept it at first, couldn’t accept that its most desperate hope had been thwarted. It worried at the fallen human with its hands and claws. It tried to prod, push, frighten him into motion. It was no use. He was no use to the creature any longer. No more than a slab of cooling meat now.

It threw back its globular head and howled its anguish to the sky.

Missiles screamed across the grey sky, leaving smoke trails like scars in their wakes.

The Death Korpsmen saw them coming and sprang into well-drilled action. They broke formation, leapt for cover where they could find it. A moment later, fire blossomed three times within their ranks and scores of them were consumed.

The rest of the forces continued their relentless advance. The young trooper would have expected no less of them.

Many of the attacking soldiers had dropped to their stomachs, hauling themselves forward on their elbows. They returned fire, from missile launchers of their own and from the vehicle-mounted stubbers. Some of them – the nearest to their objective, the ruined city – lobbed krak grenades.

They were targeting the defenders’ gun emplacements, wherever they could identify them. The ruined city shook with the impacts of their projectiles, and the turret in which the young trooper crouched threatened to crumble beneath him.

He heard the general’s voice, bellowing over the clamour: ‘Target the enemy’s big guns. Destroy them and you reduce their offensive capability. Do not be distracted by their—’ A particularly fierce explosion, close by, drowned out the rest.
The instructions had been heard elsewhere, however.

Another pair of missiles shot out from inside the city. They streaked over the skull-masked heads of the attacking army. Bringing up the soldiers’ rear was a ragged line of artillery units. The first missile struck an Earthshaker cannon and cracked its armoured shell. The second, however, fell short and only claimed more human lives.

The first of the Death Korpsmen had crawled into long-las range. It was the turn of the snipers to do their work. In the doorways and windows all around the young trooper, muzzles flashed. He held his own fire, however. There had not been enough sniper rifles available for everyone. He remembered the general’s admonishment: ‘A shot fired too soon is a shot wasted.’

The snipers were doing little good, anyhow. For every Korpsman cut down by their las-beams, four more surged forwards to replace him. Some were driving their dead along before them, utilising their bodies as shields. They too had been taught to make the best use of every resource.

‘Remember your orders... It has already been calculated that you cannot win this battle... Today, you face defeat, at the small cost of your worthless lives. But die bravely, die hard and... Praise be to the Emperor!’

The young trooper’s moment was approaching.

This was what he had been waiting for, that brief window of opportunity during which the enemy would be within his range, before they overran his position. Hardly any time at all in which to act. Did he worry he might fail in his Emperor-appointed task? Did he offer up a prayer to his god for his immortal soul?

He knew that his first shot would betray his presence. It would have to be a good one, then. His best shot. He chose his target. It could have been any of the advancing Korpsmen, really. He aimed for the eyepieces of the mask. Did he wonder at all about the face behind those dark lenses?

Did the young trooper ask himself if it might be a face he recognised?

A single las-beam through the brain. Failing that, if the mask was only damaged, still it would expose the wearer’s skin to the poisonous atmosphere. Death would be equally certain. A slow and lingering death.

A single moment. But the young trooper had been waiting for it all his life. He held his breath and squeezed his trigger.
A voice – a human voice – had lured the creature here to this vast city square, still partially intact, although most of the avenues and staircases that branched off from it had collapsed.

However, something was wrong. It could taste it on the foetid air that there had been life here, and not too long ago. Not now, though. The square was empty. From where, then, had that taunting voice originated?

The answer came in the form of an electronic squeal which set the creature’s hackles on end. A short burst of radio static. Then the voice blared out again, startlingly loud and close. It emanated from a metal box above the creature’s head. A speaker, affixed to the side of a mangled, rusty lifter cage.

The creature howled again and lashed out with its claws. Its first swipe cut the speaker’s wires and choked off its lying promises. The creature’s blind fury, however, was not assuaged. It reached up and gripped the speaker with both hands. It wrenched it from its moorings and dashed it to the ground.

There was silence for a moment. Long enough for the creature to contemplate its failure, to mourn its unfulfilled existence, if indeed it was capable of such thoughts.

And then… Then, something new. A new sound. The unmistakable clomp of approaching footsteps. A delicious new sound. And a new taste in the air.

Did the creature stop to ponder its incredible fortune? Did it offer up a prayer in gratitude to its tyranid gods for sending it this perfect life form – this human being, this lone human being – at its time of direst need?

The new arrival wore armour, a dark greatcoat and a full facemask. His garb made him indistinguishable from his fallen, dead comrade. He had likely been drawn here by the creature’s howl. His weapon was readied. That put it at a disadvantage.

Had it had more time – had it known that someone was coming – it would have sought out cover, prepared an ambush. As it was, it was caught out in the open. Exposed. The creature caught the human’s eye, through his dark lenses. He snapped up his rifle to cover it, but didn’t fire. Did it occur to the creature to wonder why? Or did it merely count its blessings once again?

It had to get closer to him. It couldn’t risk any sudden moves, however. It stole a step, two steps, towards its victim, keeping its keen eyes trained on him all the way. The human being backed away a single step. He had already looked into the creature’s eyes too long. He was transfixed. It had him now.

A plaintive whine – an attempted cry for help, perhaps – died in the human’s
throat. The last shred of his will to resist. He had actually fought longer than most.

He relaxed his battle-ready stance and lowered his weapon.

He surrendered himself to his natural predator.

The exchange had been over in seconds.

The young trooper had loosed off four las-beams. Two, at least, had found their targets. He didn’t know if he had made any kills. The enemy’s response had been too fast, too furious.

He had had to abandon his turret. It had been strafed, totally destroyed, by stubber fire. Stubber fire! That meant he had cost the enemy more than he had expended himself. He had done well. Most unexpectedly of all, he was still alive.

‘–repeat, those of you who are still able, fall back to your secondary positions. Those of you who are not, if you can hear this message, we salute you.’

The young trooper’s direct route through the ruined city was blocked. A tunnel had been brought down by the Korpsmen’s bombardment, forcing him to take a detour. He was joined en route by more of the city’s defenders, far fewer than had made the outward march to the perimeter alongside him.

The skull-masked soldiers exchanged no greetings, no acknowledgement of each other’s presence. Nor was the young trooper moved to see that some of his comrades had sustained injuries. One of them was missing his left arm beneath the elbow, blood and filth soaking through an improvised tourniquet.

‘Keep moving. You must stay ahead of the enemy. He will keep you from forming a new defensive line if he can.’

Another section of the roof came down. It was some way ahead of the young trooper. He only knew what had happened because of the tremendous noise, and then the cloud of dust that billowed back along the tunnel to engulf him.

He was saved from choking by his mask and rebreather unit. He knew that some of his comrades would not have been so lucky. He had no time to mourn them, even had he been inclined to do so. No time to consider that it could as easily have been him, crushed under the remnants of the city’s upper levels.

What had been lost, anyway? Just the lives of a few men who could never have been Korpsmen or fathers. Worthless lives. The lives of rejects. Rejects
like him.

For the second time, he sought a new route to his assigned position. He clambered over the remains of a flattened hab-block. He ducked beneath a stone archway, crumbling, but defiant beneath the creaking weight of its burden, still displaying the scored symbol of the Administratum with stubborn pride.

The young trooper emerged into a large, open space. He could tell this mostly from the ring of his own footsteps, as he couldn’t see or hear a great deal else. A city square. Its vaulted roof was largely intact, allowing just a sliver of the sky’s grey light to pierce it. The young trooper had no luminator. His eyes would need a few seconds to adjust to the dusty gloom.

He didn’t have those seconds. A shape shifted in the darkness ahead of the young trooper and his ears were violated by a terrible noise: a harsh, non-human screech, which set his every nerve on edge.

He had been taught about xenos, of course. Twisted, blasphemous monsters that bred in every dark crevice of the Imperium like a cancer. He had never expected to encounter one. Not on Krieg. Not alone. Did that prospect horrify him? Disgust him? Or maybe he thanked the Emperor for this unexpected chance to serve.

Either way, the young trooper readied his lasgun. He waded through the shattered remnants of statues and fountains. He followed the sound of gasping breaths and a putrid stench that penetrated even his protective mask.

And came face to face with the creature.

It had sensed his approach and dropped into a waiting crouch. The creature was bipedal, but more insect-like than human in appearance. Two of its additional limbs ended in bony hands, the other two in nasty-looking claws. It had natural armour: a chitinous, blue-purple exoskeleton. Its round head was oversized for its body and long, sharp fangs gleamed between its distended jaws.

The young trooper had no name for this particular breed of xenos. He didn’t know its capabilities. He only knew that it was different, and therefore a threat.

In the shadows behind the creature, he made out a human shape. A fellow trooper, fellow reject, on his knees; awake, apparently, and showing no signs of injury, but unmoving. Acquiescent. And, in the same instant that he realised what this must mean, he was transfixed by a pair of bright purple, alien eyes.

He felt them worming, burning their way into his brain. And was lost.
But for only a moment. Salvation arrived, unexpectedly, in the form of two more comrades, doubtless looking for a safe route through the besieged city, just as the young trooper had been; stumbling into this square as he had done.

The xenos’s gaze flickered towards the new arrivals. They levelled their guns at it, but fired no beams. They had no authorisation to consume resources in that way. Even lasgun power packs couldn’t be recharged indefinitely.

They resorted, instead, to a two-bayonet charge. The xenos bared its claws and emitted a warning hiss. If it expected its Krieg-born attackers to falter, however, then it was disappointed.

It reared up and slashed at the two men as they reached it. It tore open the stomach of the first of them. In exchange, it was bloodied by the bayonet of the second, stabbed through the joint of a spare arm as it shielded its throat.

The young trooper stumbled forward to join the battle. His mind had been freed once the xenos’s stare was broken. It had taken him a moment, however, to pull himself together. He felt as if he were waking from a dream, his senses dulled.

The creature knew when it was outgunned. It turned tail and ran. There was no point in chasing after it; that much was immediately evident. It was too fast for any of the three troopers – inhumanly fast – and more surefooted than they would have been across the rubble. It was out of their sight within seconds.

The young trooper went to see to its victim instead. He hadn’t so much as twitched, even during the brief battle that had raged in front of his nose. He was deep, deep under the xenos’s hypnotic spell. What had it done to him? It had infected his mind, for sure, if not his body. Standing orders, in that case, were very clear.

The young trooper snapped his hypnotised comrade’s neck.

‘This is it. We have confirmation that the enemy is on the move.’

The same words as before, echoing throughout the city.

‘Stand fast. Remember your training. Remember your orders. You must be ready to meet your attackers with lethal force.’

The young trooper ought to have been in position by now. A minor link in the secondary defensive line. A shorter line by far than the first one. The Death Korps was advancing again. He ought to have been crouched, ready for them. Waiting.
What, then, was keeping him here?

He had been rejected by the Korps’ recruiting sergeants. He wouldn’t have been given a reason. It might have been a lack of aptitude. More likely, they had found a flaw in his genetic makeup. One of the kinds that manifested during adulthood, undetectable in the vitae womb. *A damned mutation!*

This, then, was how he served, as a target for the draftee soldiers who until today had been his peers. A final test for them before they were shipped off-world to their first assignments. A live-ammunition training exercise.

But all that… That was before.

The young trooper was alone. His two comrades had patched up their wounds and followed the general’s voice. Had either of them deduced that that voice was only a recording, played a thousand – no, at least a hundred thousand – times before?

None of the rejects in the field had been issued with a comm-bead. Doubtless, that had been adjudged a waste of resources too. How could their leaders have anticipated, after all, that they might have something to say?

But how, then, could they know about the new danger in their midst?

As the xenos had fled, hurt, from the city square, it had left a trail of stinking ichor behind it. It was likely that it was dying. But then, surely, that must have been so ever since it had arrived on Krieg? And it wasn’t dead yet…

There must have been a hundred ways down from the old city to the newer tunnels underneath it. The tunnels in which the young trooper had been birthed and trained, in which tech-priests and medicae specialists laboured endlessly to extract and refine Krieg’s single natural resource. The techniques they used were outlawed on every other Imperial world, and with good reason. The vitae womb was this world’s most valuable asset, but its vulnerability too.

*A hundred ways*, each of them ostensibly sealed off long ago.

But what if the xenos found one of them? What then?

‘*Wait for it. Hold your fire until it can have the greatest possible effect. A shot fired too soon is a shot wasted.*’

The young trooper closed his eyes to the voice of the long-dead general. The nearest speaker in the square was broken anyway. He turned his back deliberately to his out-of-sight comrades. And he began to follow the trail.

No doubt, he considered this to be his duty. After all, had his superiors only known what the young trooper knew; had they only been here to countermand those out-of-date orders… They might even have praised him for his initiative.
Or perhaps they would have deplored his disobedience.

Did the young trooper feel a thrill of excitement – or perhaps of fear – as, for the first time in his life, he acted as an individual? Or did he ask himself if the recruiting sergeants had seen this coming, seen it in his psychological profile?

Perhaps that was the very reason why they had rejected him in the first place.

The trail led him away from the renewed sounds of mortar fire.

He found himself in a part of the city that no human eyes had seen in centuries. He left fresh footprints in the ashes of long-gone ages. The nuclear wind moaned in the young trooper’s ears like a lament of old ghosts. Like the ghosts of Colonel Jurten and his band of loyalist followers, who had fought here once for the soul of Krieg and won. A crusade – and a victory – well worth its terrible cost.

The xenos had remained undercover, as much as it could. It had slipped between the most intact of the city’s remaining structures, keeping to its deepest shadows. A few times, it had wormed its way into spaces inaccessible to its less flexible pursuer. The young trooper, however, found a way around each obstacle and always picked up the trail once more.

The splatters of the creature’s life’s blood were growing closer together. It was slowing down. At last. The young trooper became more cautious. He yanked an ancient, broken shield out from under some rubble, polished it on his sleeve.

He held the shield out in front of him, at an angle, as he advanced. His hope was to find the xenos by its reflection in the shiny surface. That way, he might be spared the full effect of its alien gaze.

That theory, however, was never tested. He heard his enemy before he saw it, heard its guttural growl and the scraping of its claws – against metal? It was just on the other side of that teetering section of wall. Almost within his grasp…

The noises ceased. Had the creature heard him coming, despite his attempts to be stealthy? Had it caught his scent on the wind? Was it waiting in ambush for him?

The young trooper stole up to the half-wall. He dropped into a crouch beside it. He held his breath, listening intently. He heard nothing. He used his shield as a mirror again, to peer around the wall’s edge. He saw no menace lurking
there.

In the ground behind the wall, he found a hatchway. It was ancient, rusted shut; fused, too, into the concrete by the heat of some long-ago explosion. Rubble had been cleared away from atop the hatch, fresh marks scored into its surface. Claw marks. Most tellingly of all, dark blood was congealing around its edges.

The xenos had been here. And it had been trying to get below. Had it given up because its waning strength was not equal to the task? Or only because it had sensed that it was no longer alone?

Did this prove that the young trooper had done the right thing by following it?

It must have been weakened, else surely it would have stood its ground and fought him. The man of Krieg had become the predator now, and the xenos his prey.

Did that thought imbue him with extra confidence as he resumed the hunt?

He clambered through an arched window frame.

It was just too narrow for his ceramite-plated shoulders. His greatcoat snagged on a treacherous shard of glass, making him a sitting target. He tore himself free, hastily, and dropped into a stagnant darkness.

The young trooper was inside a temple. At least, it had been a temple once. Its wooden pews had been smashed to splinters, its altar desecrated so thoroughly that he couldn’t bear to look at it. A stark reminder of his people’s sins.

He stooped, instead, to examine the trail of blood. It was difficult to make it out in the darkness. The trail appeared, however, to lead across the temple floor and out through a hole in the opposite wall. Was it instinct alone that kept the young trooper from following it? Was it logic that suggested to him that he had been led here for a reason?

Or was the Emperor watching over him, even in this darkest of places?

Still crouching, he hefted his mirrored shield in front of him. He angled it to look over his left shoulder, then his right. And he saw it: A glint of purple in the shadows, right behind him. Those alien eyes!

He whirled around as the xenos sprang at him, hissing furiously.

It must have chosen this place of shadows to make its stand. It must have
doubled back along its own trail to surprise him. It screeched, frustrated, as its claws were met by metal, the metal of the young trooper’s damaged shield. He recognised the terrible sound from before, from the square, and it made him wince.

The xenos fell back to its corner, glaring balefully at its opponent.

He was careful not to meet its purple gaze. He looked the creature squarely in its slobbering maw. His shield had buckled under the force of its attack, so he cast it aside; it had more than served its purpose. He raised his gun.

The xenos had run out of shadows in which to hide. It was well worth a small expenditure of las-power to end its threat. Such was evidently the young trooper’s judgement, anyway, and no one was present to gainsay him.

The xenos must have known it couldn’t run. It came at the young trooper again, in a whirlwind of teeth and limbs. Unflinching, he fired two beams into its twisted body. The first was deflected by the creature’s exoskeleton; the second burned a round hole through its cranium. It didn’t die.

If its tenacity surprised the young trooper, however, then he couldn’t afford to show it. He braced himself, transferring his weight to his back foot, to meet the creature’s charge. It almost bore him to the ground, even so.

Bony hands snapped shut around his lasgun and tried to wrench it from his grip. At the same time, claws swiped at the trooper’s throat. He deflected the latter with an armour-plated elbow, pushed when the xenos was expecting him to pull and rammed the stock of his lasgun into its gaping jaws. Teeth shattered, the creature howled and recoiled in pain, but the gun was lost.

He reached for his knife instead.

His foe was quicker. Its bloodied tongue lashed out like a whip, its aim unerring. Its tip pierced the young trooper’s heavy greatcoat, finding a gap in the armour beneath it. It skewered his shoulder above the clavicle, eliciting from him his first vocal reaction of the day: a sharp intake of breath.

Blood rushed to his head and his knees buckled. Did he know, in that moment, what the creature was doing to him? Perhaps, if the Imperium had been somewhat freer with its secrets. If he had been able to name it…

Genestealers existed to reproduce. And that was all. This one would have come to Krieg for that sole purpose, likely stowing away aboard a supply ship or troop carrier. Its vicious tongue doubled as something like an ovipositor.

It was trying to impregnate the young trooper with an embryonic organism, one that would rewrite his genetic code and corrupt his mind. Any offspring he
sired, then, would be the genestealer’s offspring, mutant monsters like itself.

And the young trooper’s sole purpose, then, would be to bring such monsters
into being – as many as of them he could manage – and to nourish them.

It wouldn’t work. He was a reject. And rejects were barred from
participating in Krieg’s breeding program. So, win or lose this battle, the
creature’s bloodline would end here either way. If only either of them – the
human being or the alien – could have known it. If only either of them could
have appreciated that brutal irony.

The young trooper swung his knife with all the force he could still muster. It
was a last-ditch, desperate tactic. It bore fruit. His blade sliced through knotted
muscle and he was deafened by a nerve-rending shriek. Stinking ichor
spattered the lenses of his rebreather mask, and blinded him too.

The tip of a severed tongue was still embedded in his left shoulder. He felt
for it and gripped it between his gloved fingers. He yanked the slimy
appendage out of his bleeding flesh and flung it emphatically away from him.

By the time he was able to see and hear again, it was over.

The xenos had given up its frantic struggle, and surrendered at last to its
mortal wounds and radiation sickness. The young trooper picked himself up
and gazed at the cadaver impassively. His thoughts were his own as they had
always been.

One thought, however, must certainly have crossed his mind. He must have
been aware that he had done more than just kill his enemy. Thanks to him – a
lone reject, born of an unworthy people – the xenos scum had suffered the most
cruel of all possible fates. A fate that the young trooper no longer had to fear
himself.

It had died with its life’s purpose unfulfilled.

The war was over.

He could hear the general’s recorded voice again:

‘–repeat, the city has fallen to the invading forces. All surviving defenders
should now return to their barracks.’

Did the young trooper breathe an inward sigh of relief at that
pronouncement?

His encounter with the xenos had taken its toll on his body. His shoulder was
stinging where its tongue had broken his skin. His temples were pounding and
his face was drenched in sweat. His wound was probably infected.

‘You have tasted defeat today. But no matter. Remember, such an outcome was expected. The important thing is that you have served faithfully and well. You have justified your Emperor-given lives. Praise be to the Emperor!’

The young trooper staggered under the weight of his dead burden. His foot slipped between shifting hunks of debris; his ankle twisted.

The xenos’s body slid off his shoulders. It smacked into the ground face-first and lay, broken. An empty shell. He didn’t have the strength to try to lift it again. And who could know why he had brought it this far, anyway?

Had he thought it might prove useful to the specialists in the tunnels below? A fit subject for their study? Or had his motives been more selfish?

‘Remember, you must salvage as much equipment as you can from the fallen.’

Through his fever, the young trooper recognised a structure ahead of him: the great stone archway, which led into the city square. The square in which he had first come face to face with his destiny. His barracks were not far from here. If he could make it there, he would be able to eat, drink, sleep and receive medical treatment.

And be ready to fight again and die tomorrow.

That was, if he wasn’t executed for breaking bounds.

Did he wonder if his unauthorised absence had even been noticed?

The young trooper heard movement ahead of him. Through a haze – smoke settling from the battle or his own eyes misting? – he saw masked figures. Fellow rejects? No. They were far too well-equipped, with backpacks and belts that bulged and bristled with tools and weaponry. One even had a flamer slung across his left shoulder.

Two of them were crouched beside the prostrate form of a third: either tending to his injuries or administering his final rites, the trooper couldn’t tell which.

Six lasguns snapped up to cover him. He didn’t raise his own weapon in return.

Was it simply that he lacked the strength to do so? Or did the young trooper sense the futility of such an action? Had he thought himself safe because the exercise was over? At what point did he realise that this news hadn’t reached the enemy?

That their orders to kill on sight had not yet been countermanded?
Five of the six Death Korpsmen held their fire. There was no sense in wasting ammunition, after all. The sixth – the one that, by unspoken agreement, had the best shot – squeezed his trigger. He aimed for the eyepieces of his victim’s mask.

A single las-beam through the brain.

What final thoughts passed through the young trooper’s mind as he died?

Did he rail against the injustice of his demise: to be gunned down by one of his own kind after protecting their descendants from infection, safeguarding their people’s future? Hadn’t he proved the recruiting sergeants wrong about him, after all? Did he perhaps bemoan the fact that they would never be told of his heroism?

Or was it sufficient that his god, the Emperor, knew?

Perhaps he accepted a fate for which he had been thoroughly prepared. He might have felt contented, even, with the high price for which he had sold his life.

In the final analysis, of course, it didn’t matter.
It didn’t matter in the slightest what the young trooper felt or thought. It never had.

The first troopship arrived that same evening.

The new recruits to the Death Korps of Krieg stood ready. Waiting.

They had formed up in platoons at the edge of the ruined city, their recent battlefield. Did any of them think about the bodies still lying in its rubble?

Somehow, they had managed to line themselves up perfectly, despite the trenches and potholes beneath their feet, the scars that ran across their planet’s dead surface. They kept their backs straight and their rifles shouldered.

They had sacrificed much for their meaningless triumph. If their superiors considered the casualty rate acceptable, however, then who were they to argue?

Yes, there had been some deaths. But the survivors had emerged from the exercise with skills honed and with experience that would certainly prove invaluable to them on the battlefields to come.

‘You have tasted victory today. But remember, such an outcome was expected.’

Vox speakers were attached to what remained of the crumbling city walls.
The voice of a long-dead general blared out of each of them, loud, echoing and metallic. A recording, played a thousand – a hundred thousand – times before.

The new Korpsmen obeyed the voice’s orders.

They stood fast as two drop-ships descended onto the plain in front of them, their downdrafts blowing up twin hurricanes of ash and soot. Hatchways cycled open and access ramps were lowered, but no living being emerged from inside the vessels to breathe in Krieg’s deadly atmosphere. Few beings ever dared do that.

The Korpsmen set off towards the ships before the dust had begun to settle; they became silhouettes, striding through the poisonous clouds. Platoon by platoon, they filed aboard the first drop-ship, then the second.

‘The important thing is that you have served faithfully and well, and that you will continue to do so.’

Soon, these young soldiers would be conveyed to an obscure world, located near the outer rim of the Segmentum Tempestus. They would replace the newly-dead of three Krieg regiments there, to fight a losing battle against an ancient, powerful evil.

Their first real battlefield. For so many of them, their last.

And all the time, their generals’ voices would be ringing in their ears:

‘It has already been calculated that you cannot win this war. The Emperor’s most glorious triumph will not be achieved in your lifetimes.

‘But for every second you stand against the enemy’s guns, you deplete his resources. You make him weaker. Your lives may be worthless, but you can sell them dearly.

‘This, then, is your objective. It is your duty and your destiny: die bravely, die hard, and know that even the meagre sacrifice you make will be noted and weighed against your ancestors’ heresies.

‘You will be hastening the hour – that glorious, promised hour – when the sins of Krieg will at last be forgiven, and its sons redeemed in the Emperor’s all-seeing eyes.

‘And thus, your fleeting existences will have been justified.’
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Steve Lyons has written novels, short stories, radio plays and comic strips for characters including the X-men, Doctor Who, Strontium Dog and Sapphire & Steel. He has written several non-fiction books about television shows, and contributes to magazines. His work for the Black Library includes Ice Guard, Death World and the audio drama Waiting Death.
The Death Korps of Krieg arrive at a mining world overrun by necrons, determined to win this brutal war at any cost...

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