

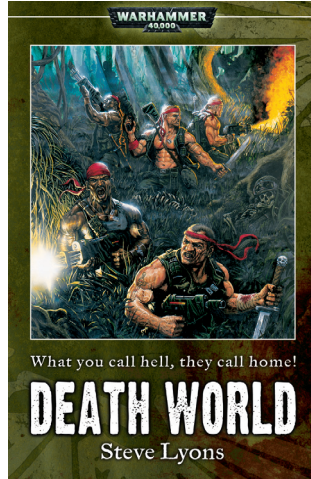
Death World

By Steve Lyons

The Catachan jungle fighters of the Imperial Guard are an elite regiment that specializes in destroying the Emperor's foes on the most dangerous worlds of the Imperium.

Their training is really put to the test when a squad is sent to the death world of Rogar III in response to an ork incursion. But as well as dealing with the green-skinned orks they must do battle with the planet itself and the mysterious figures that stalk them across the deadly terrain.

Deathworld is an action-packed tale of survival in the grim, far-future!



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. *Death World* is his twentieth novel.

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The following is an excerpt from *Death Word* by Steve Lyons.

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As soon as he woke, Trooper Lorenzo knew there was something wrong.

He rolled to his feet, simultaneously drawing his fang. He crouched in silence, in the dark, ready to drive half a metre of Catachan steel into the heart of any man or beast that thought it could sneak up on him.

But Lorenzo was alone.

He turned on the light, suppressing a prickling, creeping feeling as he realised again just how close the walls of his basic cabin were. And beyond those walls...

Lorenzo's bed was undisturbed; he preferred the floor, though even this was too flat for his liking. He could feel the beginnings of a stiff neck. All the same, he had slept for almost five hours. Longer than usual. Warp space did that to him. Out there, beyond the adamantium shell of the ship that carried him, there was nothing. But the warp itself distorted space and time, and that played hell with Lorenzo's instincts – and his body clock.

His brain itched. He was tired, but he knew he wouldn't sleep again now. He cursed his weakness. His tiredness would make him less alert. In the jungle, it could mean the difference between life and death.

Lorenzo was safe here, in theory. No enemies of the Imperium lurked in the shadows. No predators to sneak up on him as he slept, unguarded. Only the warp itself to worry about, and the possibility that it might capriciously tear the ship and its occupants apart – and there was nothing he could do about that if it happened. Nothing anyone could do.

They said no one but the Navigators could look into the warp. They said it would drive a normal man insane. Still, Lorenzo wished he could take that chance. He wished the ship had win-

dows, so he could face his enemy and, perhaps, begin to understand it as the Navigators did.

Lorenzo had been in the thick of a space battle once. He had sat inside a cabin like this one, gripping the side of an acceleration couch as he rode out the shockwaves of near misses and glancing blows, his knuckles white; his life, his destiny, in the hands of a ship's captain and his gunners – and of the Emperor, of course. He had hated that feeling of helplessness. He had prayed for the attackers to board the ship, so he could have met them face to face. When Lorenzo died, he wanted the comfort of knowing he had fought his best against a superior foe – and if he had his way, that foe would be no mere space pirate or ork, but something more worthy of his origins and training.

When Lorenzo died, he wanted to be able to salute his killer, and be buried in its soil.

He splashed a handful of water on his face, and ran a hand through his tangled black hair. He threw on his camouflage jacket, though it would be useless against the greys and whites of the ship's interior. He re-sheathed his knife, and was comforted by its weight against his leg; his Catachan fang was a part of him, as much as his limbs were. As unlikely as it was that an attack would come, he had learned always to be prepared. It was when you allowed yourself to get comfortable that death could strike unexpectedly.

Somewhere on this ship, he was sure that other members of the company would be awake. He could probably find a card game.

Lorenzo's booted feet rang against the metal floor as he left his cabin, tinny echoes returning to his ears. The air was recycled, stale, and it didn't carry sounds in the way that fresh air did. The artificial gravity wasn't quite the same as that of any planet he'd visited. And it was quiet – so deathly quiet. There were none of the sounds of nature to which Lorenzo was attuned, the subtle clues that mapped out his surroundings for him and warned when danger approached. Instead, there was only the faint throb of engines, the vibrations reverberating through the hull so their origin was untraceable.

There was something wrong...

Everything was wrong. Man wasn't meant to exist in this unnatural environment. None of its signs could be trusted, and this made Lorenzo uneasy. If he couldn't rely on his own

instincts, what could he rely on? 'Fear not the creatures of the jungle but those that lurk within your head.' The old Catachan proverb came to him unbidden and he thanked the Emperor that his company had its next assignment. They were already on their way to a new world, a fresh challenge.

He didn't know the details yet. Still, he had no doubt of one thing. Soon – within days, he hoped – his squad would be fighting their way across hostile terrain and through hostile creatures, beset by threats from all directions. It was likely some of them would die. He would be in his element again, his destiny returned to his own hands.

He ached for that moment.

IT WAS EARLY afternoon, ship time, when Colonel 'Stone Face' Graves summoned his Third Company of the Catachan XIV Regiment to the briefing room.

The men of four platoons, their bandoliers slung across their backs, crowded into the small area. Four platoons, comprising twenty-two squads – including two squads of Catachan Devils, who stood near the front and around whom even the most hardened veterans left a respectful space. Then there were the hulking, low-browed ogryns, included in the briefing as a courtesy though they would most likely understand only half of what was said. So long as they were pointed towards the enemy and permitted to rend and maim, they would be happy.

Lorenzo felt comforted by the presence of so many compatriots – by the press of their bodies and the natural, earthy odours of dirt and sweat.

'Listen up, you soft-skinned losers,' barked the colonel. A howl of good-natured protest rose from the assembled company, but Graves's chiselled features remained harsh and rigid. 'Naval Command think you lot have had it easy too long, and I agree with them. I begged them: "No more milk runs. I want no less than the dirtiest, most dangerous job you've got. I won't have my Jungle Fighters turning into fat, lazy sons of acid grubs who wouldn't lift a hand to scratch their own arses!" So, ladies, last chance to pamper yourselves in your luxury quarters – because as of this evening, you'll be working for your keep.'

This pronouncement was met by a rousing cheer.

'Planetfall at 19.00 hours,' the colonel continued, his voice

loud and clear across the tumult though he'd made no effort to raise it. 'Anyone not in full kit and waiting at the airlocks by 18.30 finds himself on punishment detail for a month!'

'Yes, sir!' came the answering swell from the crowd.

'Colonel,' someone yelled from the back. Lorenzo recognised the voice of 'Hotshot' Woods, from his own squad. 'You serious? Is this going to be a real challenge for us this time?'

'You idlers ever hear of Rogar III?' growled Graves. 'It's a jungle world, out in the back of beyond. Explorators found it a couple of years ago, decided it was right for colonising and strip-mining. Just one problem: They'd been beaten to it. That's why they called on us. We have Guardsmen down there fighting orks for the past year and a half, but they're starting to find it tough going.'

Lorenzo joined in the collective jeers of mock sympathy.

'They're crying out for someone to hold their hands,' added Graves, to a roar of laughter. 'You see, seems Rogar wasn't the walk in the park they thought it'd be. Three weeks ago, in response to reports from the front, the planet was re-categorised as no longer suitable for colonisation...' He left a long pause there, but every man present knew what was coming, and anticipation hung heavy in the recycled air.

'...on account of it being classified as a deathworld!' concluded the sergeant – and this time, the cheer went on much longer and louder.

'It's A CROCK, that's what it is.'

Lorenzo was sharing a mess hall table with four other members of his squad. He looked down at his bowl gloomily, and let a dollop of over-processed grey mulch slide from his spoon. Another thing he hated: Imperial Guard rations. If he'd been planetside, he'd have found something – some herb or spice – to make them more palatable. Or someone would have hunted down some indigenous beast, and his squad would have feasted on meat.

Lorenzo considered not eating at all until he had made planetfall. But on top of his disturbed sleep patterns, the last thing he needed was to let his energy levels dip. He gathered another spoonful, thrust it into his mouth and tried to swallow without tasting it.

'Stone Face got it right,' continued Sergeant 'Old Hardhead'

Greiss in his gravelly voice. "This is just another wet-nursing mission for a bunch of city boys who got in over their heads. You tell me, how can a planet go from being colony material one day to deathworld the next? It can't happen!"

'I don't know, sergeant,' said Brains Donovanits, his thick black eyebrows beetling as his brow furrowed. 'I've been keeping an eye on the comms traffic, and the latest report from the commissars on the ground makes for pretty interesting reading. They've had some real problems out there.'

'Yeah,' put in Hotshot Woods, his blue eyes sparkling as he suppressed a grin, 'and you know Command wouldn't send us in without good reason, sergeant. They know what they're doing.'

Greiss shot the young trooper a stern glare through narrowed eyes. It only lasted a second, though, before he dropped the pretence and let out a bark of laughter, slapping Woods amiably on the back.

'It'll be the same old story,' grumbled the grizzled sergeant as his good humour subsided. "Things not going too well at the front, orks getting too close to Command HQ for the top brass's liking. The next thing you know, some officer's been stung by a bloodwasp or got himself a nettle rash, or... or..."

'Got his foot tangled in a poison creeper,' suggested Steel Toe Dougan in his usual laid-back tone.

'Suddenly, he's screaming "Deathworld"!'

'There has also been some mention,' Donovanits continued undeterred, 'of abnormalities in Rogar III's planetary readings. The Adeptus Mechanicus went in to investigate, but found nothing. Nothing but orks, anyhow.'

'Ah, listen to Brains,' scoffed Greiss. 'Never happy 'less he's got his nose in some report or other.'

Donovits shrugged. 'It pays to be forewarned, sergeant.'

'And since when did Navy reports tell you anything worth reading? The only place you get to know your enemy, trooper, is down there on its surface, in the thick of the jungle. Man against nature.'

Lorenzo felt something stirring in his chest at Greiss's words. He'd been feeling less edgy since they'd dropped out of the warp into real space, for the final approach to their destination, but still he longed to escape this prison. It was almost worse, knowing that release was so close. Time seemed to have

slowed down for him. Lorenzo knew the others were restless, too, chafing for action. He didn't know if they shared his sense of unease, if the warp had affected them as it had him, and he wouldn't ask. There were some things you didn't talk about.

'I don't know, sergeant,' said Woods. 'There were times on that last world I wished I *had* stayed curled up on a bedroll with a good book. Might have made for more thrills, if you know what I mean.'

'Got a point there, Hotshot,' laughed Greiss. 'I could almost have felt sorry for them... what were they called?'

'Rhinoceraptors,' prompted Donovits.

'Yeah, right. Few frag grenades under their hide plates, and boom! Didn't know what'd hit them. A couple o' squads could've taken out the lot of 'em. Hell, Marbo could probably have done it on his own.'

'He wouldn't have thanked us for wasting his time, though.'

'You're right there, Hotshot.'

'Of course,' said Dougan, quietly, 'they did get Bryznowski.'

Greiss sighed. 'Yes. They did get Bryznowski. Heard we lost a few of the ogryns, too.'

'And that rookie from Bulldog's squad,' said Dougan, easing himself back in his chair so he could stretch out his bionic leg. It had taken a hit a couple of worlds ago, and now it had a tendency to seize up if he didn't keep it exercised.

There was a short silence as the five soldiers remembered fallen comrades, then Greiss's craggy features folded into a scowl.

'Way things are going,' he grumbled, 'I'm going to end up dying in my damn bed!' He waved aside Woods and Donovits's well-intentioned protests. 'Come off it, you lot. I'm thirty-six years old next birthday. Leaving it a bit late for that blaze of glory. But that's okay. I made my mark. I just want to go out the right way, that's all. Been too long since I had a scrap I couldn't sleepwalk through. Long time since I faced a deathworld worthy of the name.'

'Maybe you should put in for a posting back home,' said Dougan, sympathetically. 'Back to Catachan. Stone Face will understand. He's coming up to the big three-oh himself.'

Lorenzo was aware that, by Imperial standards, Colonel Graves was a young man, and Greiss and Dougan only middle-aged. But then, most Imperial citizens didn't grow up on

Catachan. Life there was shorter.

'Ah, I couldn't leave you jokers. But it's the youngsters I feel sorry for. Like Lorenzo here. How's he going to make a name for himself if he never sets foot on a world worth taming?'

Lorenzo looked up from his meal, to grunt an acknowledgment of the name check. He didn't reveal how much it smarted. Greiss would never have called Hotshot Woods a 'youngster', and Lorenzo was two years older than he was.

'I got a name for Lorenzo,' quipped Woods. 'Why don't we call him "Chatterbox" Lorenzo? Or "Never Shuts His Yap" Lorenzo?'

Lorenzo glared at him.

Greiss pushed his bowl aside, and hauled himself to his feet. 'All right, men,' he said, his voice suddenly full of confidence and authority. 'You heard what Colonel Graves said. Drop positions by 17.30 hours.'

'The colonel said 18.30, sergeant.'

'That's for the rest of those slackers, Donovits. My squad forms up at 17.30 sharp. Fifty deck reps, a few circuits of the deck – that should loosen up the muscles, get the adrenaline pumping. Then, when we get down to this "deathworld", we're going to tear through it like it was nothing, show those Guardsmen down there a thing or two. This time tomorrow, we'll be back in warp space, headed for somewhere worth the sweat!'

Lorenzo greeted the prospect with mixed feelings.

THE WHOLE OF Third Company could have fitted into one drop ship with room to spare. Instead, Colonel Graves had ordered them to split up, one platoon to a ship. That meant only one thing. He was expecting trouble on the way down. Better to lose a few squads and have the rest arrive intact than to risk losing all twenty-two to a lucky shot.

The five squads in Lorenzo's ship had separated to the edges of the troop deck, sitting in their own small clusters in the rows of narrow seats. It wasn't that they didn't get on, just that Deathworlders found it best to make no more attachments than they had to. They were too easily broken. Lorenzo had no friends, but he had something better. He had nine comrades, who would die for him in a heartbeat and he for them.

The shadowy spaces around the cramped seating area were

empty, apart from a dusty Sentinel scout walker tucked into one. The Catachans carried little more equipment than would fit into their kit bags – and those bags stayed with them, nestled in their laps or deposited on an adjacent seat. Lorenzo pictured the four ships streaking towards the surface of Rogar III, blazing with the heat of re-entry, like meteors from the heavens. He wondered how many Guardsmen on the ground would turn their heads upwards and thank the Emperor for sending them such an omen. The thought made him feel good. It almost made him forget that he hadn't touched ground himself yet.

There had been a reallocation of troops a few days earlier. The commander of C Platoon, Lieutenant Vines, had disbanded one squad and reassigned its members to bring the rest up to strength. Greiss's squad had two new arrivals to complete its complement of ten – and old hands Myers and Storm were currently passing the time by quizzing one of them, a nervy youngster by the name of Landon.

Landon was eager to please, bragging about a time back on Catachan when he'd wrestled a blackback viper single-handed. Myers and Storm were pretending to be impressed, but Lorenzo knew they were poking fun at the rookie.

The other newcomer, Patch Armstrong, had an easier ride. It had taken an ambush by four ice apes on the frozen world of Tundrar to deprive Armstrong of his left eye – and even then he had snapped the spine of one beast, gutted two more and gunned down the fourth as it had fled. The patch he wore, and the crooked ends of the scar that protruded above and below it, were his badges of honour. Like Dougan's leg, and the plate in Sergeant Greiss's head.

The drop ship was being shaken.

It had only been a little at first, but now it was growing stronger. Sharkbait Muldoon had rolled up the left sleeve of his jacket to paint his own, better, camouflage pattern directly onto his skin, layering on natural dyes with his knife; he let out a curse as the blade slipped and nicked his arm. Lorenzo said nothing, but his fingers tightened around the armrests of his seat.

'Must be one hell of a storm,' commented Woods. But Lorenzo observed that Greiss's jaw was set, his teeth clenched, his nostrils flaring, and he knew this was no mere storm.

Then, just like that, they were falling.

The drop ship plummeted like a brick, like it had when it had first been launched from its mother. Lorenzo's stomach was in his mouth again; had he not been strapped in, he would have been slammed into the ceiling. Woods, cocky as ever, had loosened his own restraints, and now he was fighting to hold himself down as g-forces rippled the skin of his cheeks.

For eight long seconds, Lorenzo was facing his worst nightmare. Then the engines caught them and they were flying level again, but still buffeted, the deck lurching unpredictably beneath their feet. Behind the din of the protesting hull, the soft, artificial voice of the navigation servitor sounded over the vox-caster: *'Warning: extreme atmospheric turbulence encountered. Destination coordinates no longer attainable. Prepare for emergency landing. Repeat, prepare for emergency landing.'*

The first impact came almost as soon as the warning was issued.

Lorenzo had barely had time to get into the brace position, his chin on his chest, his hands clasped over his head. It felt like someone had taken a sledgehammer to every bone in his body at once. And then it happened again, with only marginally less force this second time.

The drop ship was skipping along the ground, its engines shrieking. Lorenzo was rattled in his seat, his straps biting into his chest. He concentrated on keeping his muscles relaxed, despite the situation, knowing that to resist the repeated shocks would do him more harm than good.

Then they hit the ground for the final time, but they were still barrelling forwards, and the scrape of earth and branches against the outer hull was almost deafening. Rogar III, as Donovits had taken pleasure in informing everyone, was blanketed in jungle. There were no open spaces in which to land, but for those cleared with axe and flame. Lorenzo pictured the scene outside the drop ship's hull now, as it ploughed through tangled vegetation, the servitors straining to rein in its speed before it hit something that wouldn't yield to its considerable mass. Before it crumpled in on itself like a ball of paper.

And then, at last, they were still, the engines letting out a last dying whine as the drop ship's superstructure creaked and settled. The lighting flickered and cut out, and Lorenzo could see nothing in the sudden total darkness. But he knew his way to

the hatchway, and his squad was the closest to it.

The drop ship had come to rest at an angle. The deck was tilted some forty-five degrees to the horizontal, so Lorenzo had to climb to reach his goal. He swung himself from one empty seat to the next, using their backs to keep his balance and his bearings. From all around, he could hear the sounds of buckles popping and men leaping to their feet.

He was almost there when he realised he had been beaten to it. The hatch had buckled a little and was sticking in its frame, but Woods managed to shoulder it open even as Lorenzo was about to lend him a hand. First a crack, then a rectangle of brilliant light blazed in Lorenzo's eyes, and he blinked to clear the patterns it burnt into his retinas.

In the meantime, Woods had clambered out onto the angled side of the ship. 'Hey,' he called down to the others enthusiastically. 'You've got to see this. It's a beautiful evening!'

Lorenzo frowned. The upturned hatchway offered him the familiar sight of a jungle canopy – but behind the greens and browns, the leaves and the branches, the sky appeared to be a perfect, deep blue, free from cloud. Woods was right. If there *had* been a storm, it had passed, impossibly, without trace. But then, what else could have tossed the drop ship about like that?

It was there again: that sense of wrongness he had felt in the warp. He needed to get out into the open. The rest of the platoon were crowding up behind him anyway, so Lorenzo followed the sweet scent of fresh air, mingled though it was with the stench of burning. He gripped the sides of the hatchway and pulled himself up and out through it.

He had barely raised his head above the parapet and started to take in his new surroundings, when Trooper Woods pushed him down again, with a warning yell: '*Incoming!*'

Three plants were shuffling towards the drop ship. They looked like the mantraps of Catachan, but taller. Three bulbous pink heads, surely too heavy for their stalks to support, split open like mouths. No teeth within, though. These plants were spitters.

Three jets of clear liquid plumed through the air. Lorenzo and Woods tumbled back into the drop ship together. Woods had been hit, a thick goblet of acid sizzling on his arm. He whipped out his knife – a devil claw, typically ostentatious –

and half-cut, half-tore his sleeve away before it was eaten through. Still, the attack had left a livid red burn on his skin.

Somewhere, not far away, a carrion bird was screeching in delight.

'So, how's it looking out there?' asked Greiss – and Lorenzo realised that the sergeant was addressing him.

A smile tugged at his lips as he gave the traditional answer: 'Reckon I'm going to like this place, sergeant. It reminds me of home!'

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