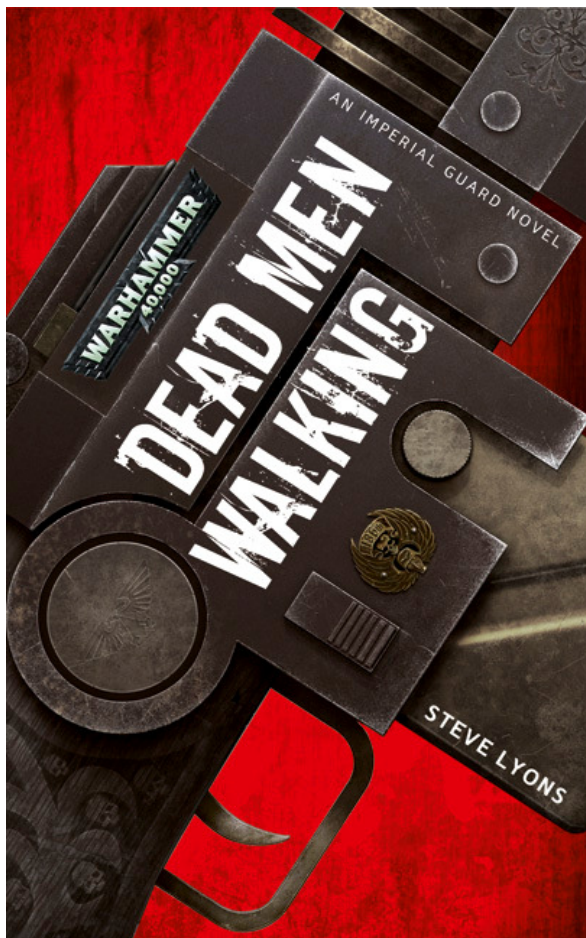




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## ***DEAD MEN WALKING***

*An Imperial Guard novel*

*By Steve Lyons*

Deep beneath a mining planet, an ancient enemy slumbers, waiting for the time to awaken and reclaim what is theirs. When the necrons rise, the world descends into a cauldron of war and the remorseless foes decimate the human defenders. Salvation comes in an unlikely form – the Death Korps of Kreig, a force designed for the harshest of conflicts and as unfeeling as the Necrons themselves. When the two powers go to war, casualties are high and the magnitude of the destruction is unimaginable. Can the most brutal of Imperial Guard regiments triumph, and what will the price of victory be?

### **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*.



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**DEAD MEN WALKING**

Steve Lyons

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GUNT HAR HAD NO idea where he was. He had never strayed this far from home before.

It was too dark for him to see much, anyway. He was just following the people in front of him, who in turn were following the people in front of them, who in turn were following the luminator beams of a squad of soldiers.

To begin with, Gunthar had felt as trapped by the press of bodies around him as he had during the mutant attack last night. This was almost worse, in fact, because he didn't know what he was running from this time. He had no idea when or how or from which direction a threat might come, let alone how he might avoid it if it did.

By now, however, he had settled into the rhythm of putting one foot in front of the other, and his nerves had been numbed by tedium. He hadn't heard any explosions or screams for almost an hour. Whatever was happening in Hieronymous City, hopefully the worst of it was over. Gunthar wondered how much further it was to the city walls, and then over them to the space port.

It had already been a long day. He had spent the afternoon with one proctor official after another, then with a couple of PDF officers. He had related the story of the artefact in the mine tunnel over and over again,

omitting the part where he had fled like a coward. Returning to his office, he had received a call from the Governor himself and had told the story one more time. He had felt important for a while, the centre of all this attention. Then he had just felt tired.

He had spent the evening organising the mine shutdown, as the Governor had instructed. Each of his foremen had had questions, but Gunthar had been told to say as little as possible so as not to panic them. 'I know about as much as you do,' he had assured them, 'but I'm sure this is just a precautionary measure.'

He had sent Kreuz home. Alone at his desk and undisturbed by the chiming of the comm-link terminal, Gunthar had felt his eyelids growing heavy and remembered that he hadn't slept in thirty-six hours. The next thing he recalled was waking in a pitch black room, to the sound of amplified voices from outside.

He had had to grope his way to the stairwell, knocking his ankle and skinning his knee in the process. He had climbed two floors to the nearest skyway, where PDF soldiers had instructed him to join a guided human convoy, ten people wide and more than sixty deep. The whole of the city was being evacuated but, when Gunthar had asked why, he had been told: 'I know about as much as you do, sir. I'm sure this is just a precautionary measure.'

Progress thus far had been painfully slow. The convoy stopped at every tower for the soldiers to employ their loudhailers and wait for more bewildered refugees to join them. Some were unhappy about being herded from their homes in the middle of the night, and there were questions and arguments to deal with. Nevertheless, few people were game to be left behind. The convoy had

more than doubled in size, until Gunthar could no longer see how far behind him it stretched.

He heard a trooper talking on his vox-handset, and was pleased that at least they weren't totally cut off from the rest of the world. The trooper gave the convoy's position, and received directions in return. It seemed they would have to take a diversion, because... Gunthar wasn't sure if he had heard that right. A skyway down? What did that mean? How was that even possible?

The nocturnal cold had sunk into his bones. He rubbed his arms through the fabric of his grey work tunic, but it didn't help much. He wished he had put on a coat that morning, but then he could hardly have known the day would end like this. For that matter, there were several things he wished he could have collected from his hab before... He suppressed that thought. Everything would be all right, Gunthar told himself. The Emperor would provide.

THE CONVOY HAD made a sharp left turn, trudged past a number of empty hab-blocks, and now it turned sharp right. Gunthar felt his foot touching something, which turned out to be a lump of plascrete. A moment later, he kicked another, then another, and soon he was clambering over a heap of rubble. He thought about the voice on the vox and the distant explosions he had heard, and his nerves began to jangle again.

Perhaps the artefact had been a bomb, after all. Perhaps it had not been the only one. And perhaps there were still more concealed about the city.

A brick slid beneath Gunthar's foot, and he landed heavily on one knee, but found the impact cushioned by something soft and squishy. He was appalled to find he was kneeling in the spilled guts of a half-buried corpse.

Gagging, he pushed himself to his feet and stumbled on, but he soon saw another pale hand protruding from the wreckage. From somewhere behind him, to the right, he heard a shriek and then a mutter of comforting voices, as someone else presumably made a similar discovery.

He wondered how many people lay dead beneath him. Many of them would just have been sitting in their homes, he thought, maybe even asleep in their beds. Had they even had time to be afraid, or had their worlds ended in a flash before they knew what was happening to them?

‘Over here,’ somebody yelled. ‘There’s somebody moving down here. He’s alive!’

The voice came from just a few rows in front of Gunthar. As the crowd pressed forward, a couple of them wielding low-powered luminators of their own, he saw two men digging through the debris, casting bricks aside, and between them he saw a wiry figure, little more than a silhouette to him, attempting to stand. The figure was bloodied, hunched over, evidently hurt, and if only Gunthar had been closer to this person, this brave casualty, he would have advised him to lie still, not to risk exacerbating his injuries, to wait for the soldiers to reach him with their medi-packs.

Then, the figure straightened to its full height, and Gunthar’s senses warned him – before his brain could work out the reason why – that something was wrong.

Another scream distracted him, and another – one from close behind him, one from a longer way in front – and suddenly Gunthar knew that what he had seen was not a figment of his imagination, nor a trick of the shifting light. He knew that the figure before him was not human.

Others were seeing it too, not least among them the men who had crouched to help. It was too late for them. The figure, the creature, flexed its shoulders, and the two men jerked and gasped and died. It took Gunthar a second to realise what the creature had done, that its claws had stabbed each of them through the heart – and, as a pocket luminator fell from a screaming girl’s hands, its light glinted off those claws and Gunthar saw that they were metal-like knives, each almost a metre in length.

The creature loped forward, and those terrible claws found a third and a fourth victim. Gunthar could see more clearly now, see the creature’s metallic skull face and the tatters of flesh that clung, rotting, to its skeletal form.

No, it was worse than that, he realised as a putrid stench washed over him and turned his stomach. The flesh was not the creature’s own, just a cloak it was wearing. It must have flayed the skin off one of the corpses for the purpose of disguising itself. This ghoul had been waiting in the ground for someone to find it, to reach out to help it.

Gunthar had never seen such a gruesome sight before. The mutant last night didn’t even come close. Nor had any of the newsreels prepared him for this, for the fact that the universe could spawn such nightmares. He wanted to run, wanted it more than he had thought it possible to want anything, but his legs were like lead and his gaze was riveted to the ghoul’s dead metal face.

Where could he have run to, anyway? The ghoul wasn’t alone. The screams had already told him as much – and now, it seemed to Gunthar’s cold-deadened ears that the whole of the crowd was screaming.



Two troopers appeared, their lasguns raised, and Gunthar began to mutter a grateful prayer but faltered halfway through. The first of the troopers was white with fear, his hands trembling so hard that he couldn't squeeze his trigger. The second loosed off two shots, but they both went wild. It was enough for the ghoul to take notice, to pivot with surprising agility and speed to face its attackers. Gunthar felt ashamed of himself for being so relieved that it wasn't coming for him anymore.

The ghoul advanced, slicing off the heads of two more civilians who couldn't get out of its way. The second trooper got off another shot, which struck the ghoul squarely in its shoulder. The impact of the las-beam made it flinch, halting it for a second, and Gunthar held his breath.

The ghoul pounced on the trooper, who screamed as its bladed claws flashed and whirled about him. It wasn't just killing him, Gunthar realised; it was flensing the skin from his body. The trooper collapsed, a red raw lump of meat, still alive for the moment, staring in abject horror with eyes he could no longer close. It was all too much for his comrade, who turned and ran, the ghoul hard on his heels.

As it headed away from him, Gunthar was released from his paralysis. The crowd was dispersing in all directions, and he followed suit, choosing the direction that took him directly away from the ghoul. It only occurred to him too late that he was running back the way he had come, back into the city, when he should have been trying to get out of it.

Two more troopers were coming his way, falling back before another of the skull-faced, skin-clad nightmares. This second creature lashed out with its blades, and slashed through an armoured chest plate as if

it were made of paper. Its victim staggered backwards into Gunthar, and left a trail of blood down his clothes as he slid to the ground, dead. The surviving trooper set his lasgun to automatic and fired wildly. At least two of his bolts struck and injured civilians, but enough thudded into his target to send it reeling. As Gunthar watched with another prayer on his lips, the ghoul fell and lay twitching. The trooper put his lasgun to its head and blew out its brains – if indeed it had had brains inside that ghastly metal skull. Gunthar could almost have cheered.

Then, the trooper stiffened, his eyes bulging, blood pouring from his mouth, and Gunthar saw that a blade-clawed hand had struck up from beneath him, and efficiently disembowelled him. Another creature was rising from the rubble.

Gunthar ran, and was glad to leave the demolished site and feel firm ground under his feet again. He ran, and a hundred other people ran with him, but they soon began to peel away, into alleyways, around corners, into emptied hab-blocks if they could. Gunthar ran, virtually blind because the moon had disappeared behind a cloud and there were no longer any luminators around him. He ran, and he wondered how his life had come so quickly to this, one terrified flight after another.

He should have picked up the dead soldier's lasgun. He only realised that now. It hadn't occurred to him before. Yesterday, it would have done. He would have thought about it, at least. He would have seen himself with barrel blazing, taking down that last foul creature before it could stand. A chance to be the hero he had dreamed of being. But that was yesterday, before the mutants and the artefact, before Gunthar Soreson had learned that there was no hero inside of him, after all.

That was before he had witnessed the fate of heroes.

GUNT HAR ROUNDED A corner, saw an abandoned autocab almost too late to avoid it, tripped over a flight of steps and landed sprawling on the ground, lacking the energy to get up again. He lay on his stomach in the near-silent darkness for minutes, until his breathing began to settle back into its normal rhythm.

He felt the amecyte ring in his pocket, digging into his leg, and he thought about Arex. He hadn't been worried about her before – as a member of the Governor's family, she was one of the best-protected people in the city – but who could protect her from what Gunthar had just seen?

He wanted to go to the High Spire, to find her, but he was hopelessly lost. He had made so many random twists and turns that he didn't even know which way the city walls were any more. The knowledge wouldn't have helped him, anyway. The ghouls were between him and those walls – and a moment's thought told him that the High Spire would likely be a dead end too. Arex would have been evacuated from there long since, probably in a motor vehicle.

She was probably waiting for him at the space port, wondering where he was.

It seemed to Gunthar that, whichever way he went from here, he could only make his situation worse. His best bet, then, was to stay where he was, to find shelter for the remainder of the night, and perhaps in the morning things would look better. At least, in the daylight, he could get his bearings. At least, in the daylight, he would be able to see the monsters coming.

He climbed the steps over which he had floundered, and tried the door at their head but found it locked. He

could have kicked it down, he supposed, but that would have made too much noise. He moved on along the skyway, and tried three more doors until he found one with a broken lock.

His first tentative push met with some resistance from something behind the door. Gunthar pushed harder, and winced at the resounding sound of falling crates. The door stuck halfway, and he had to squeeze through the gap into a dark, dusty hallway. Hab doors stretched along the left hand wall, a wooden staircase along the right leading both up and down.

A shadow moved on that staircase and, before Gunthar could react, something leapt at him: a snarling, spitting something. He was thrown off-balance, back into the front door, which slammed shut behind him. He couldn't see a thing now, could just feel a flurry of limbs swiping and slashing and kicking at him. Instinctively, he threw up his arms to protect his face, and a flailing elbow caught his attacker in the throat.

The man fell back with a groan of pain, and as he stumbled into the half-light cast by a murky stair window, Gunthar saw his face and saw that, contrary to his worst imaginings, he was just a man. A middle-aged man with a thatch of black hair and a thick beard. Throwing up his hands, Gunthar cried, 'It's all right. It's all right. I'm human, like you. I was just... I was looking for a place to hide.'

The man couldn't speak, he was still trying to get his breath back, but he had calmed down a little. He was still cautious, though, keeping his distance.

'Do you live here?' asked Gunthar. 'In this hab-block?'

The man shook his head. 'I thought you...' he panted, 'I thought you were one of those creatures.'

‘You saw them too?’ said Gunthar. ‘You were out on the rubble?’

‘They stank of death,’ said the man. ‘There was so much blood, and that smell... I’m afraid I ran. I just saw an opening, and I went for it. I was trying to barricade this door behind me, when you... I thought they must have followed me.’

‘I don’t think so,’ said Gunthar. ‘I was outside a long time, and I didn’t see... I don’t think they followed us.’

‘What were those things? And where in the Emperor’s name did they come from?’

‘I don’t know. I wish I did, but... What do we do now? Do we stay here? Would that be safest, do you think? We could build up the crates again.’

‘No. We just saw how much good they were. I don’t know what I was thinking. If anyone saw them, they’d know for sure there was somebody in here. Anyway, they’re destroying the towers, you’ve seen the wreckage. I want to be able to... I don’t want to be trapped in this hab-block if...’

Gunthar hadn’t considered that, and the thought was a sobering one.

‘I’m Weber,’ said the man, composed now and stepping forward with a hand outstretched.

Gunthar took it, and introduced himself. ‘I run the 201st Floor Emporium,’ said Weber. ‘Used to run it, I should say. I suppose we all “used to” do something now. Used to have jobs. Used to have places to live.’

‘Things aren’t that bad,’ said Gunthar. ‘They can’t be. The PDF are out there. They’ll deal with this, and everything will get back to normal.’

Weber gave a derisive laugh. ‘You obviously didn’t see what I saw. Those soldier boys were going down

faster than the civilians were. Half of them couldn't get their brains in gear to even fire their guns.'

'That was just one squad, a few men. You wait till they bring in the tanks and the mortars, and... and if that's not enough, they can call in reinforcements, the Imperial Guard or... We're too... This world is too valuable to the Emperor, and we've been loyal, we have served Him well. He will save us.'

'You watch too many newsreels, kid,' grumbled Weber. He started down the hallway, trying doors. 'I was talking to a fellow out there, before... He was up on 204, told me he was attacked by a swarm of metal insects. They were knocking down buildings, just taking slices out of them like—'

'204?' echoed Gunthar. The address was close to his own home, too close.

'I suggest,' said Weber, 'we find ourselves an empty hab, one where the tenants left in a hurry without locking up, and we lay low for the night.'

THEY FOUND A room on the next floor up. It was laid out exactly like Gunthar's room, like all the rooms he had lived in: a basin in one corner, a stove in another, a single bed in a curtained alcove. The advantage of this particular room, however, was that it overlooked the skyway in front of its hab-block.

'We should take it in turns to sleep,' said Weber, 'while the other one stays on watch.' Gunthar agreed and volunteered to take the first shift, although privately he wondered what he could possibly do if he saw trouble coming.

He was too keyed up to sleep, though, as much as he needed to.

Within minutes, Weber was spark out on the bed, snoring. Gunthar paced the hab, trying to keep warm. Eventually, he thought to check the cupboards, and found a heavy grox-hide coat hanging in a wardrobe. He wrapped it about himself gratefully, and settled by the window.

The warmth of his breath created fleeting patterns on the glass. Weber's snoring, an irritant at first, became softer and settled into a regular, almost soothing rhythm. Gunthar was almost too hot in his borrowed coat, and he thought about taking it off but that would have meant climbing out of his comfortable chair.

He let his eyes rest for a moment, and the next thing he knew there was a flickering light and he started and sat bolt upright.

How long had he slept? Not long, he hoped. It was still dark outside. Weber was still snoring on the bed. But there was something else.

There were figures on the skyway below, proceeding along it in a tight formation. Nine or ten of them. It must have been their luminators that had played across Gunthar's window, waking him. He thought they were soldiers, at first. They moved like soldiers, not with the stooped, bestial gait of the skull-faced ghouls but with a sense of purpose. He wondered if he should wake Weber, or maybe bang on the window and get the soldiers' attention. He didn't much fancy stepping out into the cold night again, but what if the soldiers knew a safe route out of the city? They might even have a vehicle nearby.

Then a lumnator beam caught one of them, and Gunthar drew in a sharp breath.

The figure was dressed like a soldier – black greatcoat, helmet, backpack, heavy armour – and it

carried a gun, but its face was like the faces of the creatures, a blank-eyed, impassive, metal skull. A tube snaked out from beneath its mouth to its pack, as if the very air of this human world was poison to its kind.

Gunthar dropped to the floor beneath the windowsill, and cursed himself for not having done so at once. What if he had already been seen? Weber must have heard the movement, or sensed something, because suddenly he was awake, craning his neck to find his fellow refugee in the dark. 'What is it?' he whispered sharply.

'Something... something out there.'

'The ghouls? Have the ghouls come back?'

Gunthar shook his head. 'Not the ghouls,' he whispered. 'This is something worse.'



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