

# FIFTEEN HOURS

*A Warhammer 40,000 novel by Mitchel Scanlon*

Arvin Larn is terrified. On the battlefields of the far future, only an insane man wouldn't be. Seventeen years old and still new to the Imperial Guard, he is thrust straight into his first war and must face horrors that his sheltered upbringing could never prepare him for.

The trenches of the 41st millennium are filled with worse things than rats and trenchrot. For one, the world they fight for is being contested by the monstrous barbarian orks. The orks live for battle and know no fear, so it's no wonder that the average life-span of an Imperial Guardsman on this forsaken world is only fifteen hours...



*Mitchel Scanlon resides in Derbyshire. He has written short fiction for the Black Library, as well as superhero tales for the UK market. 'Fifteen Hours' is his first novel.*

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### *from FIFTEEN HOURS*

‘HUP TWO THREE four. Hup two three four,’ Sergeant Ferres yelled, keeping pace with the men of 3rd Platoon as they marched the dusty length of the parade ground. ‘You call that marching? I’ve seen more order and discipline in a pack of shithouse rats.’

Marching in time with the others, painfully aware of his own visibility, Larn found himself silently praying his feet kept in step. His place midway along the platoon’s left outer file put him out in plain view right under the sergeant’s eyes. The two months’ worth of basic training he had endured so far had left him with few illusions as to what happened to those who failed to live up to the sergeant’s exacting standards.

‘Keep your feet up,’ the sergeant screamed. ‘You’re not courting in the wheat fields with your cousins now, you inbreeds! You are soldiers of the Imperial Guard, Emperor help us. Put some vim into it.’ Then, seeing the platoon was nearly at the far edge of the parade ground, Ferres yelled again, his voice strident and shrill with command. ‘Platoon. About face. And march.’

Turning smartly on his heel with the others, as they resumed marching Larn found himself feeling dog-tired and exhausted. So far today, like each of the sixty days before it, Ferres had had them running training exercises since dawn. Marching, weapons drill, kit inspection, hand-to-hand training, basic survival skills: every day was a never-ending series of challenges and tests. Larn felt he had learnt more in the last two months than he had in his entire life. Yet, no matter how much he and the rest of the platoon learned or how well they did, none of it seemed to satisfy their vengeful sergeant.

‘Hup two three four. Keep in step, damn you.’ the sergeant bellowed. ‘I’ll keep the whole damned lot of you drilling here

for another two hours if that's what it takes to make you keep to time!'

Larn did not doubt Ferres meant his threat. Over the last two months the sergeant had repeatedly shown an inclination to hand out draconian punishments for even the most minor infractions. Having been on the receiving end of such punishments more than once already, Larn had learned to dread the sergeant and his idea of discipline.

'Company halt,' Sergeant Ferres yelled at last, hawkish eyes watching to see if any of the Guardsmen overran their mark. Then, apparently satisfied that every man had stopped the instant they heard his order, he yelled again, loudly elongating every syllable of the command. 'Turn to the left!'

With a sudden clatter of clicking heels the company turned to face their sergeant. Seeing Ferres advance purposefully towards them, Larn did his best to keep his shoulders back and his spine ramrod straight, his eyes staring fixedly ahead as though gazing blindly into the middle distance. He knew enough of Sergeant Ferres's ways by now to know that an inspection would follow immediately they had finished marching. Just as he knew Ferres would not be any kinder to the soldier who failed to pass muster now than he would to anyone whose marching did not meet his standards.

From the corner of his eye Larn saw Sergeant Ferres move to the end of the outer file of Guardsmen to begin his inspection. Moving slowly along the line to inspect each man in turn, the sergeant's dark eyes darted swiftly up and down, scanning for any flaw in equipment, dress or manner. At times like these, no matter where in line he stood, it always felt to Larn as though it took the sergeant forever to reach him. A slow torturous eternity, spent waiting like the head of a nail to be struck by the hammer – all the time knowing that, no matter how well he had worked or what precautions he had taken, the hammer would fall regardless.

Abruptly, still three men away from Larn, the sergeant stopped to turn and face the fair-haired trooper standing in front of him. It was Trooper Leden – his favourite target. Tall and broad-shouldered, with a thick neck and big hands, Leden looked even more the farmboy than the rest of the

men in the company. Even now, standing to attention under Ferres's withering glare, Leden's face was open and guileless, his mouth looking as though it could break into a warm and friendly smile at any moment.

'Your lasgun, trooper,' the sergeant said. 'Give it to me.' Then, taking the gun from Leden's outstretched hands, he checked the safety, before inspecting the rest of the gun in turn.

'What is the best way for a Guardsmen to prevent his lasgun from failing him in battle?' Ferres asked, eyes boring into Leden's face as he spoke.

'I... uh... first he should check the power pack is not empty. Then, reciting the Litany of Unjamming, he should...'

'I asked what is the best way to *prevent* a Guardsman's lasgun from failing him, Leden,' the sergeant said, cutting him off. 'Not how he should clear a jam after it malfunctions!'

'Umm...' for a moment Leden seemed stymied, until his eyes lit up with sudden inspiration. 'The Guardsman should clean his lasgun every day, taking care to recite the Litany of Cleanliness as he...'

'And if, because he has *failed* in his duty to keep his lasgun clean, the Guardsman finds his weapon jams in the heat of battle and he cannot fix it?' the sergeant cut him off again. 'What then, Leden? How should the Guardsman proceed?'

'He should fix his bayonet to the mounting lugs on his lasgun's flash suppressor, sergeant, and use it to defend himself,' Leden replied, an edge of pride to his voice now as though he was sure he had finally answered one of his sergeant's questions correctly.

'In the heat of combat? With the enemy right on top of him? What if he doesn't have time to fix his bayonet, Leden?'

'Then, he should use his lasgun as a club, sergeant.'

'A club you say?' the sergeant asked, suddenly placing both his hands at the end of the lasgun's barrel and lifting the butt of the weapon above his head. 'What, he should hold his lasgun above his head as though it were a bat-stick and he was playing shreev-ball?'

'Oh no, sergeant,' Leden replied mildly, apparently unaware that with every word he was digging a deeper hole for himself.

'He should hold his lasgun horizontally with his hands widely spaced as though it were a short-staff and strike the enemy with the butt.'

'Ah, I see,' the sergeant said, bringing the lasgun down and holding it in front of him with his hands in the positions Leden had indicated. 'And to best disable the enemy, what target should the Guardsman aim at – the face, the chest, or the gut?'

'The face,' Leden said, an idiot smile on his face, while every other Guardsman in the company winced inwardly at what they knew was coming.

'I see,' Sergeant Ferres said, bringing the butt of the lasgun up quickly to smash Leden in the bridge of the nose. Screaming, a gout of blood geysering from his nose, Leden collapsed to his knees.

'Get up, Leden,' the sergeant said, tossing the lasgun back to him as Leden shakily rose to his feet once more. 'You aren't seriously injured. Much less disabled. Look on it as a lesson. Perhaps next time you'll remember to clean your lasgun more carefully. The power node on this one is so filthy, chances are it'd burn out after a few shots.'

Turning away from Leden, the sergeant resumed his inspection. Standing three men down the line, Larn felt weighed down by the expectation of impending disaster. *Ferres is really on the warpath today*, he thought. *There's no way he'll let me pass muster. He'll find something I've done wrong. Some little thing. He always does.* Then, his heart rising in his mouth, Larn saw the sergeant pause in his slow procession down the line and turn to face him.

'Your lasgun, trooper!' the sergeant said. Then, as he had done with Leden before him, he checked the safety before inspecting the rest of the gun in turn. Sights, barrel, stock, holding lugs – for long seconds Ferres pored minutely over the lasgun as Larn felt sweat gathering at the back of his collar. Next, pressing the release catch Ferres pulled the power pack free to check the contacts and the cell well were clean. Then, glowering as he snapped the power pack back into place, Ferres raised his eyes to look at Larn once more.

'Name and number!' he barked.

'Trooper First Class Larn, Arvin A, sergeant. Number: eight one five seven six dash three eight nine dash four seven two dash one!'

'I see. Then, tell me, Trooper First Class Larn, Arvin A, why did you join the Guard?'

'To defend the Imperium, sergeant. To serve the Emperor's will. To protect humanity from the alien and the unclean.'

'And how will you do those things, trooper?'

'I will obey orders, sergeant. I will follow the chain of command. I will fight the Emperor's enemies. And I will die for my Emperor, if He so wills it.'

'What are your rights as a member of the Imperial Guard?'

'I have no rights, sergeant. The Guardsman willingly forfeits his rights in return for the glory of fighting for the just cause of our Immortal Emperor.'

'And why does the Guardsman willingly forfeit his rights?'

'He forfeits them to better serve the Emperor, sergeant. The Guardsman has no need of rights – not when he is guided by the infinite wisdom of the Emperor and, through Him, by the divinely ordained command structure of the Imperial Guard.'

'And if you should meet a man who tells you these things are wrong, Larn? If you should meet a man who claims the Guard's command structure sometimes makes mistakes and needlessly wastes the lives of the men under its command?'

'Then I will kill him, sergeant. That is the only way to treat with traitors and dissenters.'

'Hnn. And if you should hear a man spout heresy, Larn, how will you persuade him of the error of his ways?'

'I will kill him, sergeant. That is the only way to treat with the heretic.'

'And if you should meet the *xenos*?'

'I will kill it, sergeant. That is the only way to treat with the *xenos*.'

'Very good, Larn,' the sergeant said to him, tossing Larn's las-gun back to him before turning to inspect the next man in line. 'You're learning. Perhaps we'll make a Guardsman of you yet.'

'NO BRUISES, NO extra laps, not even a demerit,' Jenks said. It was an hour later, and Larn sat with the other men of his fireteam at one of the long tables inside the mess hall as their company waited for the midday meal to be served. 'You passed muster with flying colours this time, Larnie. Looks like Old Ferres is starting to like you.'

'Like me? I don't think he likes *anyone*,' Larn replied. 'Still, I can hardly believe it myself. The way he glowers at you, you always think he's going to put you on report no matter what you do.'

'Ah, the sergeant isn't so bad,' said Hallan, the squad medic, from nearby as he busied himself putting a dressing on Leden's damaged nose. 'I mean, granted he can be tough, but he's pretty fair with it.'

'Dair?' Leden said, outraged. 'Da dastard doke by dose!'

'It could have been worse, Leden,' Hallan said. 'Usually when Ferres thinks a trooper's gun isn't clean enough he kicks him in the balls. At least this way I haven't got to get you to drop your pants to tend your injuries. And besides, next time the sergeant gives you a choice between face, chest, or gut maybe you'll be smart enough to say "toe".'

'Ha, say that and you'll definitely catch one in the balls,' Jenks laughed. 'No, once Ferres has a burr riding him he's going to hurt you one way or another. You ask me, only thing you can do is take your lumps and tough it out. Unless you're like Larnie here, of course. The perfect Guardsman.'

At that, they all smiled. Even though the jibe – such as it was – was directed at him, Larn smiled with them. Even without the light tone in his companion's voice, he would have known Jenks was only joking. *The perfect Guardsman*. Larn might well have just passed muster, but he did not have any pretensions in that regard. Even after two months of basic training, he felt no more a Guardsman now than he had on the day when he had first been drafted.

For a moment, while the others continued their conversation around him, Larn considered how much his life had changed in the space of a few short months. The day after his conversation with his father in the cellar he had taken the landrailer to the town of Willans Ferry, and from there on to

the regional capital Durnanville to report for induction. From Durnanville he had been sent two hundred kilometres east, to a remote staging post where for the last two months they had trained him to become a Guardsman.

He found himself looking at his comrades. Hallan was small and dark, Jenks tall and fair, but despite the differences between them he realised they did not look any more like Guardsmen than either him or Leden. Himself included, they all still looked like what they were – farmboys. Like him, they were all the sons of farmers. So for that matter were most of the men in the regiment. They were all of them farmboys, fresh from the fields and accustomed to lives of peaceful obscurity. The arrival of the induction notices had changed that forever. Now, for better or worse, they found themselves conscripted as Guardsmen. Two thousand green and unproven recruits, sent for basic training at this staging post before they left Jumael IV for good. Two thousand would-be Guardsmen, given over to the tender mercies of men like Sergeant Ferres in the hope they could be made into soldiers by the time they got their first taste of action.

‘Anyway, if you ask me, Hallan is right,’ Jenks said, his voice breaking into Larn’s thoughts. ‘I mean, hard as Ferres is, at least you know where you stand with him. Besides, I suppose he’s earned the right to be hard. Unlike the rest of us, I hear he was regular PDF back before he got drafted. He’s probably the only man in this entire regiment who knows anything about soldiering. And, believe you me, when we make our first drop and the lasfire starts flying we’ll be glad they gave us a man like that to lead us.’

‘Do you ever think about it, Jenks?’ Larn asked. ‘Do you ever think about what it will be like the first time we see action?’

In response the others fell silent then, their faces troubled and uneasy. For as long as the silence lasted, Larn worried he had said too much. He worried that something in his voice, some tremor perhaps or even the very fact he had thought to ask the question at all had been enough to cause the others to start to doubt him. Then, finally, Hallan smiled at him; the smile telling him that all of them felt the same nervousness he did at the thought of seeing combat.

'Don't worry, Larnie,' he said, 'Even if you do get hit I'll be on hand to patch you up.'

'Lot of comfort that is,' Jenks said. 'I thought you said the only reason they made you a medic was because you were a veterinary back home.'

'Actually, it was my *father* who was the veterinary – I just used to help him out,' Hallan said. 'So not only do I know how to mend wounds, Jenks, but if we come across a pregnant grox I'll be able to assist with the birthing as well.'

'Just so long as you don't get the two mixed up, Hals,' Jenks said. 'Bad enough if I should get wounded, without having to worry about you trying to put your hand up my backside because you think I'm about to calf.'

They all laughed, the sombre mood of a few moments before gratefully forgotten. Then, seeing something at the other end of the mess hall, Jenks nodded towards it.

'Hey oh,' he said. 'Looks like dinner's here at last.'

Following the direction of Jenks's nod, Larn looked over to see Vorrans – the fifth member of their fireteam – hurrying over towards them with a stack of mess trays balanced in his hands in front of him.

'It's about time,' Hallan said. 'I swear my stomach's so empty I was starting to think my throat'd been cut.' Then, as Vorrans arrived at the table and began to hand out the mess trays: 'Zell's tears, what took you so long, Vors? This food is barely warm!'

'It's not my fault the mess line is so crowded this time of day, Hals Vorrans said. 'Besides, yesterday when it was *your* turn at mess duty I don't remember you getting the food here any faster. And anyway, remember what you said then? Your exact words were "It's not like this slop tastes any better hot". That's what you said.'

'Excuses, excuses,' Hallan replied, before turning his attention fully to the contents of his mess tray. 'Though I was right enough about this slop. Back home we wouldn't have fed this to the grox. Still it fills a hole, I suppose.'

'Fills a hole is right,' Jenks said, pulling a spoon from his mess kit and using it to prod suspiciously at the sticky grey stew in his own mess tray. 'You should keep back some of this

and take it into battle with you, Hals. Anybody gets wounded you can use this stuff to glue them back together.'

'I try to pretend to myself it's alpaca stew,' Larn said. 'You know, like they make back home.'

'And does that work, Larnie?' Jenks said. 'Does it make it taste any better?'

'Not so far,' Larn admitted with a shrug.

'What amazes me,' said Vorrans, 'is here we are, surrounded by wheat fields on every side in one of the most productive farming regions on the entire planet. Yet, every day, instead of giving us real food they give us this reconstituted swill. If you ask me, it makes no sense.'

'Well, that's your mistake right there, Vors,' Jenks said. 'Asking questions. Don't you remember the big speech Colonel Stronhim gave us on the first day of induction?'

'Men of the Jumael 14th,' Hallan said, his voice taking on a false gravity as he mocked the stern patrician tones of their regimental commander. 'In the months and years to come you will find yourselves assailed by a thousand questions every time you are dispatched to a new theatre of operations. You will ask yourselves where you are going, how long will it take to get there, what will the conditions be like when you arrive. You must put such things from your mind. The Guard's divinely ordained command structure will tell you what you need to know, when you need to know it. Always remember, there is no place in a Guardsman's mind for questions. Only obedience!'

'That was really good, Hals,' Larn said. 'You captured the old man's voice perfectly.'

'Well, I've been practising,' Hallan said, delighted. 'Though I tell you there are only two questions I want answered: *where* are they sending us for our first posting, and *when* is it going to happen.'

'I wouldn't hold your breath on that count, Hals,' Jenks said. 'I wouldn't expect them to tell us anything of the sort until they're good and ready. And anyway, even if they have decided where and when we're going, you can be sure we'll be the last to know about it.'

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