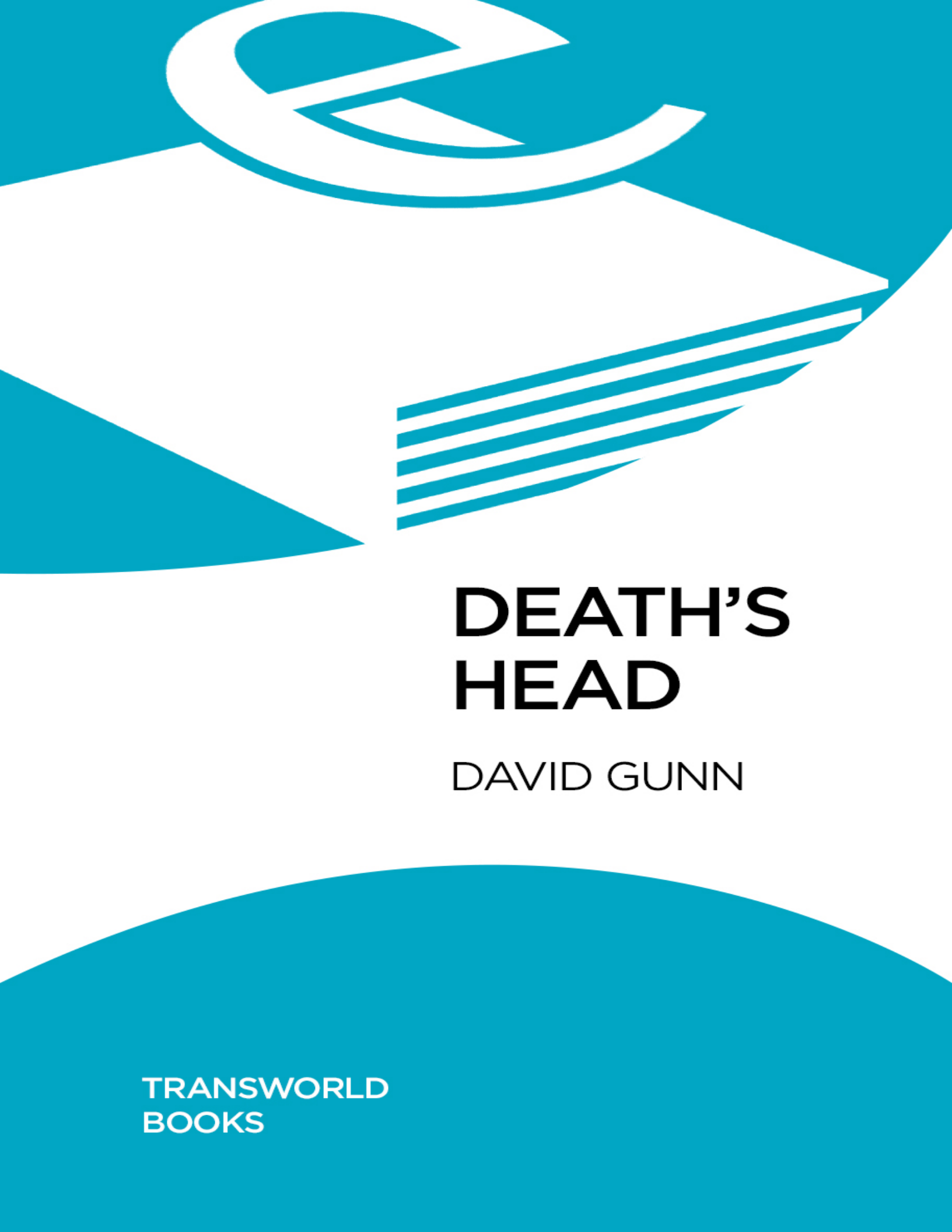




DEATH'S HEAD

DAVID GUNN

TRANSWORLD
BOOKS

About the Book

Few survive the cage. Fewer still live to face the whipping post. But stubborn, insubordinate son-of-a-bitch Sven Tveskoeg does. As this ex-sergeant in the *legion étrangère* feels the first lash fall, he sees the desert tribes attack – and watches them slaughter his comrades before his comrades can kill him . . .

Rescued from certain death, Sven joins the tribes. However his ruthless skills have come to the attention of an elite special ops force, the infamous Death's Head.

They want Sven to help them out with a little 'local difficulty'. He knows he's a pawn in a dangerous game – and pawns have a habit of being sacrificed. But Sven is nobody's sacrifice. And even a pawn can checkmate a king. . .

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DEATH'S HEAD

BOOK ONE OF THE AUX

David Gunn

Prologue

INDIGO JAXX, GENERAL of the Death's Head, wipes sweat from his forehead and straightens the sleeve of his silver and black uniform. He hates himself for doing so and knows that he will make someone suffer for his moment of weakness. He's a Death's Head general after all.

'You understand?'

Raising his head, General Jaxx meets the eyes burning into his own.

'Oh yes,' he says. 'I understand.'

'You find him,' says the voice.

The general nods.

'He is nobody. It is important you remember that.' The voice has said this before. It is obviously significant. And a response is obviously required.

'Nobodies can be difficult to find . . .'

'But you will find him?'

'Yes, sir.'

Other functionaries give OctoV a wide range of titles. *Great leader, victorious emperor, all-seeing mind* . . . General Jaxx calls him *sir*. So far, OctoV has not complained. In fact, the general is pretty sure he likes it.

'And when I find him, sir?'

'You bring him to me.'

'Alive or dead?'

The boy standing in front of General Jaxx smiles and a cold wind blows through the general's mind, eviscerating the last fragments of his self-control. Every meeting is like this. The general has known officers kill themselves because they cannot bear to come into the presence.

‘Alive, obviously,’ says the voice. ‘You will test his loyalty, his stamina, his ability to obey orders . . .’

‘And if he fails the tests, sir?’

‘You will have failed me.’

‘I will not—’ begins General Jaxx.

But it’s too late.

The general finds himself standing alone. The last flicker of OctoV’s mind offers General Jaxx a sixteen-digit set of coordinates. As the general checks these against a database in his own mind, he discovers the planet in question is a worthless piece of rock at the outer edge of the spiral.

He hadn’t even known it was inhabited.

Part 1

Chapter 1

THE CAGE OPENS at the front, a double loop of chain hingeing its door at the bottom. At the top, a thicker chain and a fist-sized padlock keep the cage safely shut.

It sits against a dirt-coloured wall, a position chosen so the desert sun can broil its occupant. Occasionally a trooper will give the cage a quick glance as he marches across the parade ground, but most men are careful to look away.

Bad luck is catching.

‘Drag him out then.’ The sergeant’s voice is raw, almost triumphant. Nodding to his corporals, he points at the cage, as if there can be any doubt about what Sergeant Fitz means.

He tosses the larger of two corporals his key.

Behind Sergeant Fitz stands a blond boy in neat uniform. He’s our new lieutenant, fresh off a troop carrier and quite obviously terrified by what is about to happen.

As the smaller corporal jacks his rifle, the larger one fumbles catching the key. Close up, I can see that he’s sweating, his fingers trembling as he reaches for the lock on my cage.

Everyone holds their breath.

Yanking at the door, he jumps to one side as the door hits dirt, raising dust. I could make them wait, but why bother? Instead, I erupt from the cage with my good hand already lunging for his throat.

The man steps back, instinct kicking in.

He’s too late.

I have his larynx between my thumb and curled first finger, and it’s the work of a moment to crush his windpipe.

For good measure, I slam my forehead into his face, breaking his nose. The corporal's already dead, he's just too stupid to realize that fact.

'Shoot the man . . .'

That's our new lieutenant. As expected, everyone ignores him. Does he really think Sergeant Fitz will allow me that easy an exit from life?

'Take him down,' says Sergeant Fitz.

Reversing his rifle, to use as a club, the other corporal advances towards me. I'm naked, I've been in the cage for fifteen days and Fitz severed half the wires on my prosthetic arm before locking me away. I'm so thirsty, I'd probably drink this man's blood if I could get him close enough . . .

He thinks he can take me.

I grin.

And that's enough to make him falter.

Dropping to a squat, I kick out the corporal's leg, roll myself up his falling body and reach his throat as his skull hits the dirt. My elbow does for this one what my thumb and first finger did for the other. He dies gasping, and I'm back on my feet and grinning at Sergeant Fitz before the lieutenant can get his pistol from its holster.

'No, sir . . . Let me.' The words are a hair's breadth away from being a direct order.

The lieutenant takes his hand from his side.

For a glorious second it looks as if Sergeant Fitz is going to challenge me himself. Unfortunately, that's too much of a dream to be true, and he signals to a couple of recent recruits instead, then signals to a couple more.

Can I take all four?

It's barely worth asking the question. They're children in uniform, cropped hair doing little to hide the softness of their faces and the fear in their eyes. *Is the sergeant that clever?* I ask myself, as I watch the recruits ready themselves for an attack. One of them has wet his pants, the stain a dark shame on his sand-coloured trousers.

‘Get on with it,’ the sergeant growls.

The boys glance at each other.

As they advance, I let the anger drain from my body. It’s one thing to kill NCOs and I knew enough about those two corporals to see them hung. It’s quite another thing to kill children and I don’t intend to start now.

A bull-hide whip tears skin on its first blow, rips muscle within five and opens a victim’s back to the bone before reaching double figures. Men begin to die when the number rises above fifteen and no man has lived beyond fifty.

This is a fact.

In the Legion fifty lashes is a sentence of death, and any decent officer will give permission for the victim to kill himself before whipping begins. But Sergeant Fitz is not a decent officer. Mind you, he’s not an officer at all. He is an NCO and they’re the worst; I should know, I used to be one.

‘Three minutes’ break.’

Being broiled in the cage is a bad way to die. I’m fifteen lashes into a far worse one, tied naked to a whipping post, with the flesh on my back peeling away like torn paper, and the man who put me here has just given his whip master a water break.

‘Want some?’ asks Fitz, holding the flask in front of my face.

Of course I do, not that I’m going to admit that.

‘Too bad.’

I’m a big man, built with physical exertion and kept lean by the demands of frontier life. Like all the soldiers in the forts south of Karbonne, I’ve burnt away my body hair with quick swipes of a fire brand. (We are not *ferox*. We will not share even secondary characteristics with them.)

Above me, on top of the whipping post, is a trophy; it’s probably going to be the last thing I ever see. It has fangs and narrow eye sockets – because *ferox* need to shield their eyes from the harsh light of the desert, and few stretches of

desert come harsher or brighter than the dunes around Fort Libidad.

The skull is taken from an adult male.

If the heavy jaw does not tell you this, the bony ridge running like a helmet crest from its forehead to the back of its neck undoubtedly will.

A dozen stories revolve around this skull. Apparently, I killed its owner in hand-to-hand combat and dragged his head back to Fort Libidad as proof. This is bullshit; what's more, it is dangerous bullshit. No one goes hand-to-hand with a ferox and lives. I found the skull eighteen miles away. This was how far I tracked a deserter on the old lieutenant's orders.

'Track him for a day,' he told me. 'After that, return.'

We both knew what went unspoken. If a man is not found inside a day, then he is dead anyway, killed by the temperature drop that hits this planet in the hours before dawn . . .

Out of my sight, the whip master picks up his whip. I know this from the crack it makes as dried blood is flicked from the lash. 'And again,' says Sergeant Fitz, and I tense myself against the next fifteen blows.

Sixteen.

Seventeen.

Eighteen.

I'm not sure how much more of this I can take. And then the skull grins. Bone twists like flesh, rotten teeth bare and the slitted eyes narrow further, in obvious amusement.

I'm going to die . . .

My thought comes as a shock.

Aren't I?

The ferox grins some more. Jaws curve upwards in a way that defies physics and all logic. *Not yet*, it says. *And not here.*

Chapter 2

THE FIRST I know of a raid is when an explosion shocks the air. Our gate guard goes down with a spear in his throat. A short spear, thrown using a sinew wrapped around its notched shaft. There's a good chance that sinew came from a human leg – most of them do.

'To arms,' shouts the lieutenant.

Sergeant Fitz is more pragmatic. 'Free fire,' he yells, my execution already forgotten.

The skull above me says nothing. It merely grins.

Able to move at speed, and deadly with bow, blade or throwing spears, the ferox fight silently and to a pre-agreed plan. Speed and silence are a deadly mix in the desert, where sounds can carry for miles and a guard with good hearing is more valuable than one with good eyes.

The ferox pour through our gate in a wave.

And we get slaughtered, that's the only way to describe it. Most of the legion are new and barely know one end of a pulse rifle from the other.

I watch a boy, barely older than I was when I first joined, drop to his knees and raise his gun to take careful aim. He even takes a breath and lets it out slowly, holding his fire until his heartbeat is steady. His first shot should blow a bull ferox apart and kill the beast behind, but he's forgotten to flick his pre-charge lever to load the coil.

The kid pulls his trigger repeatedly, shaking his head. Safety catches were abolished because new recruits kept forgetting to toggle them, but there's no future for a recruit so raw he forgets to pre-charge his weapon.

He dies with irritation on his face. Still unsure why his rifle won't fire. I'd tell him, but the gag in my mouth prevents it.

'Fall back,' cries a voice.

It's our new lieutenant, aged all of seventeen and still so new that few of us have bothered to learn his name. There's no need now. As a ferox drops from a roof behind him, the boy turns and the ferox flicks out one claw, opening a second mouth in the lieutenant's throat.

He dies in silence.

'Riddle's down,' someone screams.

And so I learn the boy's name after all.

'Fall back, fall back.'

Stand, I want to shout. *Hold steady and die well*.

The ferox are cruel to soldiers who run, as unforgiving as our own dear leader, and troopers are dying around me in their dozens, as they try to fall back towards an inner wall, which simply provides a backdrop for their slaughter. The air is hot with shit and guts, the stink of angry ferox and human blood on boiling sand. Flies settle quickly on the broken bodies.

Eggs will be laid, larvae hatched and the desert will take back what should never have been here in the first place. *The XVth Brigade, Légion Etrangère*. A ferox goes down, a youngster, half its armour burnt away.

The only beast to be wounded so far.

It feels like hours before the last boy dies. In reality, it's probably a handful of minutes and the ferox are kind, in a way rumour says is not in their nature. They kill quickly and cleanly, forcing each cadet to his knees, dragging back his head and cutting his throat before moving on.

Anyone who says these beasts are mindless knows nothing.

Seven years ago when we first built Fort Libidad the beasts would no more have cut a man's throat than open his belly; ferox have plating across their throats and over their guts and believed we must have the same.

They've obviously discovered this is untrue, because I'm looking at the proof. A hundred dead teenagers with their throats and bellies ripped open.

Their chieftain is huge.

A bull standing nine foot tall, and four foot across the shoulders, his mottled armour is chipped and cracked, and age has greyed his fur and dimmed his eyes, but when he moves towards me the others fall back to give him space.

Claws grip my jaw and turn me to face him.

This is it, I think, but his claws never close.

Instead, dark eyes glare into mine and my head is twisted further, to allow him a better view. Releasing my jaw, he taps my metal arm, considering the sound it makes. The prosthetic is crude, all pistons and rewelds and braided steel hoses that are past their safety date, but it looks better than the broken stump beneath.

'You did that,' I mumble.

Dark eyes watch me.

'Well, not you exactly.' I nod to the trophy above me. 'Him.'

The ferox follows my glance. Then his other hand moves to the broken flesh of my back as he dips his fingers into my blood and carries it to his mouth.

Seconds later, he spits and keeps spitting.

I could have told him.

Bad blood, my father always said.

As the others watch, the old bull considers his options. I have no doubt my death is at the top of that list. Every other human in Fort Libidad is dead, their blood staining the sand of the parade ground, the stink of their voided bowels so strong it fights with the scent of my executioner.

I wait, keeping my eyes on his.

This is my only vow.

Everyone makes and breaks promises and we all carry our share of those. Vows are different. Well, they are where I

come from; which is a backwater so distant our dear leader barely bothers to include it in his list of glorious conquests.

My vow is simple.

However it comes, I will look death in the eyes. I will forgive myself every broken promise and debt still to be repaid, but if I break this vow, God will never forgive me.

So we lock eyes, a tribal chief standing over nine foot tall, and me, an ex-Etrangère sergeant, aged twenty-eight, standing as upright as pain allows.

What? it asks.

I blink, despite myself.

My world suddenly reduced to a pair of dark eyes and a voice in my head. *Maybe it's the pain*, I tell myself.

As said, fifteen lashes can kill.

If not for my unnatural ability to heal, my corpse could have been waiting to greet the ferox when they arrived. The pain is extreme, so extreme I have trouble concentrating on the beast's question.

What? Its demand is louder, this time.

The gag used for a whipping post is crude. It's the victim's own belt, fastened tight enough to make speech impossible, but not so tight that groans are stifled, because that defeats the object of the exercise.

Free me, I think.

After a moment's consideration, the beast cuts my gag with a single flick of one claw. It is an object lesson in precision and reinforces why a hundred boys barely old enough to leave home lie dead in the dirt behind me.

'Soldier,' I say, wanting to answer its question while the beast is still interested.

The beast shakes its head.

'Human.'

It thinks about this, head turned slightly to one side. When it grins, the beast reminds me of the trophy nailed above me. And, once again, I see the bull ferox flick its gaze

upwards. I have no idea how much of my thoughts it can read, but it obviously catches enough.

Not human, it says.

I shrug, which is stupid.

Catching my wince, it grins some more.

'Ugly bastard,' I say.

Claws tighten around my jaw, closing slowly. Too much of that and something will break; in a man less thick-boned it would probably have broken already.

What? it demands.

Lashed to a post, surrounded by bodies and in the grip of a beast that wants to ask existential questions is not a great place to be. As the claws keep closing, I feel the bones in my jaw stress to cracking point, and think *What have I got to lose . . . ?*

'I don't understand your question.' When in doubt, fall back on stupidity, because it works every time.

As its grip loosens and its gaze becomes less fierce, the bull turns to another ferox, younger and half the size. I'd think it female, but for its skull ridge and a row of tribal markings daubed on to its breastplate.

The two beasts stare at each other.

And then the chieftain steps back, waving one hand, as if to say, *All yours*.

Terrific, I think. *Slaughtered by the tribal runt*.

But the youngster doesn't strike. Instead it grips my face and twists my head from side to side, and then up and down, as if checking the articulation. Finally, the beast turns my skull beyond what the tendons can stand and I wince. At which the beast steps back, obviously puzzled . . .

'My neck doesn't bend that far,' I say. 'You dumb fuck.'

Grinning, the youngster bares its fangs in obvious amusement.

What? it says.

'Human.'

The amusement vanishes and into my mind comes the picture of a creature bound naked to a post, blood drying like a cloak across his back and buttocks. Splintered bone is already mending and the gashes on his back have begun to close. He's shat himself, which I don't remember, and he looks smaller than I would expect, less than significant among the half-dozen ferox who . . .

Two thoughts stop me in my tracks.

One, that less than a dozen beasts can destroy a whole fort and, two, that for the first time ever, I'm thinking of the beasts as . . .

'Who,' I say.

The youngster looks at me.

Into my mind it replays its picture of the bound soldier.

'Me,' I say, then remember the ferox have no sense of personal identity. Apparently, the beasts think of themselves in the third person, as *him*. Although how any man can claim to have discovered this or had time to write it down before being ripped to bloody shreds, God knows.

'Sven,' I say. 'I'm Sven.'

The beast appears to taste the word in its head. After a moment, it nods and the others nod also. As one, they turn and lope away towards a break in the wall I've barely noticed before.

'Come back . . .'

'Don't go . . .'

When pleading fails I fall back on curses, and call the brutes everything from fuckwits to freaks and gutless cowards. And still they amble away from me and the slaughter they've left behind. A silent file of shambling ferox, already beginning to blend perfectly with the sands beyond the breach in the fort wall.

'Kill me,' I shout.

The beast at the back turns and for a second my heart stops, but then my heartbeat kicks in again and the smallest of the beasts turns and hurries after the others.

Chapter 3

THE FEROX COME back before midnight.

Well, the smallest one does. He slouches into the fort through that hole in the wall and moves like a shadow across the parade ground, picking his way almost daintily between the piles of dead. Ignoring me, he reaches for the skull on the post above my head and tries to prise it free.

'I can help.'

My words startle the youngster and that tells me ferox can hear, unless he's simply surprised to find me still alive. Twisting my head to the double moon, he stares deep into my eyes.

After a second he lets his claws drop, obviously disappointed.

A question has been asked and I've failed to answer. More worryingly, I've failed even to hear his question.

Why? I ask myself. *Why could you hear last time?*

Because fear provided a key? Possible, but fear is controlled by the limbic system and my body is now too frozen with cold to feel much more than resignation.

Glaring at the ferox, I see he's gone back to ignoring me. Without the others to be matched against, he looks huge, his teeth recently formed and razor sharp, his armour shiny with the bloom of youth. And his claws are cruel but clumsy, as he struggles with the trophy still nailed to the pole.

He can kill you, I remind myself. *Gut you and strew your insides across the sand.* But they're just words, insufficient to create the fear their truth demands.

'Free me,' I say.

Again, that flicker of interest. Only, this time, it vanishes as quickly as it arrives. I need a way to remake the bridge between us.

If not fear . . . then pain?

As he reaches for the skull, I stretch up with my hands, not to help him but to snag the base of my thumb on his lower claw. Before the beast can react, I drag down my wrist and feel flesh tear and a single word comes into my mind.

Why?

‘Must talk,’ I tell him. ‘Only way.’

He looks at me with interest. *What?* he asks.

I try not to sigh.

‘Sven,’ I say.

The beast jerks his head at the bodies strewn across the parade ground around us. Ugly in the moonlight, they’re already beginning to freeze as the night strips what little heat they have left. *Sven?*

I shake my own head, realize how ridiculous that is and say, *No*, loudly, inside my own skull.

Not Sven?

‘No,’ I say. ‘Not Sven.’

He considers this for a moment and says nothing when I reach up again and snag my wrist, harder this time. The thought of words vanishing before this conversation is finished is more than I can bear.

Captive, he says.

Am I? Does that mean he’s taking me prisoner? *Enemies capture Sven*. He says this as a statement, one allowing no argument. And as soon as I realize what he means I laugh.

‘Yes,’ I agree. ‘Enemies capture Sven.’

And, God knows, in the twenty-eight years of my short and so far brutal life few enemies have been worse than Sergeant Fitz, who now lies face up to the stars with a throwing spear through his heart.

‘Let me help,’ I suggest.

The youngster's eyes flick from the trophy to my hands and he breaks the ropes as simply as a child might snap cotton. With little to lose, I hold out my wrists, and wait while he hooks his claws into my metal cuffs and pulls until they split at the hinge.

Help, he insists, as I begin to walk away.

'Need something first.'

He follows me all the way to the armoury door. It's as well he does, because the door is made from some aerated ceramic that weighs little more than foam, but is far stronger than it looks.

'Can you break this?'

Dark eyes catch mine, amusement replacing anger. *Of course I can*, says a voice in my head, except it's not quite a voice, more a wisp of thought that tatters into silence; and the amusement is not really in his eyes, it's more . . .

God, I think. *I've begun to match feelings to the ugly fuck's smell*. The youngster turns at that, looking quizzical, and I decide to watch my thoughts.

'Door,' I suggest.

Putting his hands against the door, he pushes. When nothing happens, he pushes again. Then he draws his lips into a snarl and barges the door with his shoulder. Something creaks, and I have a nasty feeling it might have been his bones.

In the end, he sinks his claws into the door near the hinges, which is a good guess. The lock is flashy and semi intelligent, certainly too bright to be bluffed by claiming an emergency. The hinges, however, are priced down to a spec just high enough to avoid the contractor getting killed.

It's harder work than he expects. A good five minutes wasting, while I stand shivering and barely conscious and he digs his claws slowly through the shiny surface of the door, chipping his way towards the soft material beneath.

Help, he says.

And as I prepare to protest that I'll be no help at all, I realize he's reached into the door and is prising away one hinge. Great gasps come from his throat, and I know that whatever we find has to be worth his effort.

Swords, by the hundred.

What is it with crazed dictators and cavalry? We have no mounts and the dunes are totally unsuitable for heavy horse, but we still have sabres in their thousands. Also, we have enough new model pulse rifles to turn a whole desert's worth of sand to glass. These are locked down, without barrels or power packs, and a chain runs through each trigger guard. From the way the youngster's glance sweeps over them he doesn't recognize them as weaponry.

Just as well.

Of course, with the barrels in place, the guns would still need charging and unchaining. The more I think about it, the more obvious it seems to me that the new lieutenant was destined to die, deserved it even. He just didn't need to take a bunch of half-trained boys with him, but since that was what he was himself . . .

In one corner is an old box covered with dust, and fixed to the wall with an explosion of spider's web containing everything from mummified flies to the desiccated corpse of the spider itself. *Medical supplies* says the side of the box. *Empty*, announces a red sticker slapped across its top.

The blade is where I left it five years before.

'We don't want this falling into anyone's hands,' the old lieutenant told me, in that way of his, which left me uncertain if he meant what he said, or intended the direct opposite. Maybe he was saying: *Make sure this gets into unsuitable hands.*

He'd be capable of it.

Other officers succumb to wounds taken in battle or self-inflicted. Lieutenant Bonafont suffered terminal ennui. So terminal, that one day his heart simply stopped beating.

Maybe a laser blade in the hands of a homesick recruit would have provided entertainment enough to keep him alive. In which case, I failed; but then the old bastard failed us all by shuffling off this mortal coil and leaving us to the care of some child doing a six-month tour of duty.

'Got it,' I say.

The whipping post comes apart like fat melting in the sun. I cut from below, slicing away at the wood until a steel spike is revealed. After that, removing the skull is simple. A couple more cuts, a flick of the wrist and the trophy comes free. I'm armed again, of course. I wonder if the ferox realizes that.

'Here.'

The skull has a nail hole in the top, but still looks pretty good for something that's been scoured by desert winds for the best part of five years. I treat the object with respect. For all I know the ferox indulge in some form of ancestor worship and I really don't want to blow my survival at this point.

No, he says faintly.

Flicking on my weapon, I touch its blade to the back of my hand and hear his voice grow louder.

You carry it.

Chapter 4

THREE DAYS AND a hundred miles later I meet the first woman I've seen in five years. I'd like to think I'd be impressed even if she wasn't naked, although it's hard to put an age to her to begin with, because she's smeared with dirt and her hair is so long it falls around her shoulders and hides her upper body.

And I'm not being disingenuous. When I first see her, it's dark and I'm tired and she's running across a cave floor on all fours, with her breasts hanging low, like the teats on a sand wolf.

Human? The young ferox is intrigued by my interest.

I nod.

We've been thrown into each other's company during the desert crossing, and I've come to learn the meaning of at least five basic smells, while the youngster now realizes that the way I articulate my head carries the meaning of two of these.

He points at me. *Not human.*

I'm not inclined to argue, since the youngster's certainty that I'm something other than her seems to be one of the things keeping me alive.

'Sven,' I agree.

Pointing to the girl, who has frozen under his gaze, the ferox tells me she's mine, but first I have to meet the elders. This is inevitable, I suppose. Everything about the ferox is tribal, and tradition for them seems to be interchangeable with law. In fact, both concepts came from the youngster as a single thought.

The very idea of elders suggests a solemn gathering, probably round a fire. Well, that's what it suggests to me. The reality is simpler and much more boring. The youngster drags me through a huge warren of tunnels and caves, stopping only to tell every male it meets: *Not human*.

Not, they agree.

And then one of the pups, so young that his armour is still soft, brings me the girl. *Human*, he says, and I begin to understand the problem.

The girl is fifteen, maybe a few years older. From the way old whip scars cross her ribs it looks as if she's moved on all fours her entire life. She can stand and climb and fit sideways through cracks in the rock that would stop me at the shoulder, but she can't talk and when I lift dark hair from her face, there is nothing in her eyes but wariness and the sullen anger one expects from any caged animal.

I ask her name.

I ask her age.

I ask how she ended up living with ferox deep in the desert.

After a while, in disappointment and tiredness, I begin to demand answers to the impossible. Why is our beloved leader such a prick? What keeps the stars apart? Is God hardwired into our minds? If so, who did the hardwiring? The stuff that passes for serious thought in legion bars across the empire.

In a sweating tunnel hacked into a cliff face by a long dead river, a hundred miles further into the desert than any human is meant to have gone, I lose myself for a week in questions and thoughts of death.

She sits, she watches, after a while she brings me water.

'Thank you,' I say.

Nothing in her face suggests she distinguishes these words from the noises I make as I rage and weep and mourn for a hundred children whose names I'd never bothered to learn.

In my defence, I offer their slaughter, a desert hike that has reduced my feet to bloody pulp, and the fact that the first woman I meet in five years – and, quite possibly, the last person I will ever see – is little more than a ghost of what I believe humans to be.

Questions about her tribe, her mother and brothers bring no answers. A legionnaire quickly learns patois, how can we not? We take the sweepings of a fifth of the spiral arm and provide immunity from all crimes that have gone before, except treason, in return for certain death, the time and place to be of the Legion's choosing.

Common tongue, city tongue, outlying world's . . .

I even toss the girl words from traveller speech and machine cult but she recognizes none of them, and I am a man who can order a whore or a drink in fifteen different languages.

I began to agree with the ferox. If she is human then I am not.

And nor were the boys now dead at the fort, though the ferox have no way of knowing this. Nor were the women I knew in Karbonne. Nor my sister, who holds a family together in my memory, relying on sheer determination and guts when the money goes and an entire planet falls into poverty and chaos.

However, the girl is beautiful beneath her dirt. So I give her a name, though I'm uncertain she understands that *Anna* refers to her. Still, she quickly comes to recognize the tone. Anna shares my food, follows me like a shadow and no longer flinches when I come within striking distance.

It's not much, but it's enough.

Things will improve, I tell myself. *She'll learn to speak*. And in the meantime, if I want proper conversation I seek out the youngster and talk to him about the tribe and the desert and what went before. The tribe is old, a thousand chiefs if the youngster is to be believed; old, venerable and very certain of their right to this land. They have only ever lived

in caves; and their law states – quite clearly – that nothing must change.

But Sven is change.

He asks me about my tribe, then retreats and sulks for days at my answers. We fly, I tell him, between the stars and between the moons. A whole people are out there, their history written in those flickering lights that cross the sky each night.

Many Sven, he says.

I sigh.

He understands sighing now, along with tears and nods and shakes of the head. In turn, I can identify seven separate smells and a handful of his gestures. The laser knife has stopped being a weapon and become the means by which I communicate. A strange Sven ritual, which involves touching light to the back of my hand until my words become clear enough for a ferox to hear.

We return to Fort Libidad before the onset of high summer. The youngster doesn't bother to tell me why, but I know my presence is required. It is nearing the middle of the year and the winds have begun to rise and food is already scarce. Animals die when the heat comes and the ferox refuse to eat carrion.

Next dawn, he says.

So next dawn sees us ready.

Even the chieftain makes the journey, his face wrapped against the wind and a hundred miles of sifting sand. We walk in single file, following in his steps. Mostly the wind blows our footprints away, but crossing the dried edge of an oasis I look back and see that we leave only one set of prints, albeit deep ones and made strange by the fact I cannot always match the chieftain's stride.

The fort is abandoned.

And the stench inside is vicious. Flesh has fallen from bones and rotted to matted spoor beneath half visible

skeletons. In time, the heat will rot what remains completely, or desiccate it, but that time is not yet.

Door, says the youngster.

So I nod.

Walls, it adds. We speak almost effortlessly.

‘What about the walls?’

Like doors? it asks.

‘Are walls like doors?’ The heat, the winds and being near enough the only one of my kind is beginning to get to me.

Door, it repeats, more intently. A dozen ferox stand round us in a circle, watching closely. That’s twice the number of beasts needed for the original attack, so this has to be important. Also, the chief is growing impatient, his head swinging slowly from side to side.

‘Which door?’ I ask.

It is the right question.

The youngster can only remember the armoury door. Since nothing else was able to stand in his way, nothing else counts. So we walk to the armoury, followed by a silent procession of the others.

The pulse rifles are in place, broken down to lock, stock and barrel and still chained through their trigger guards. Enough weapons to launch a revolution. A wall of cavalry sabres looks as gratuitous as it ever did.

We take, he says.

‘What?’

Everything.

For a moment I feel panic. Unarmed, these beasts are deadly enough. The thought of a tribe of ferox armed with pulse weapons is beyond horrific. On the very edge of doing something stupid, I realize my mistake. To the youngster the broken-down rifles are simply clutter.

He wants the armoury itself. At least, he wants its door and walls. It takes us three days to cut the building into cartable pieces. When I suggest smaller pieces are easier to carry, the youngster just smiles. A quick baring of his fangs