

# THE QUARRY

**There's Always Another**

**Glenn Kershaw**

Year: 2106.

Location: Camp Van Tassel, France – 20 Klms from the battlefield.

Five days before Bloody Tuesday

Rain drummed on the mess's roof all morning, and the soldiers made a long track of mud from the doorway on the left to the servery. They selected their food

and paused, looking with increasing frustration for a free seat. A lucky few found a free table in one of the five columns of twenty rows.

Jarred sat at the head of a table two rows down and in the centre column. The air was full of the kind of fear-filled chatter he'd noticed just before combat, the voices running over one another, making it difficult for the others to hear him. Jarred and the four other syns with him were in a bubble of sorts. They leant in close to Jarred so they could hear. He paused in what he was saying and, in that moment, caught a strand, a part of a sentence coming clearly through the babble of voices;

‘... I mean, like, how'd I know I aint eatin' one of 'em?’

Jarred understood the words but not the meaning and returned his attention to the others. On his right, their backs to the serving terminals, were Jack and Jack. Directly opposite Jarred, but sitting at an angle so that he could see both Jarred and anyone who entered, was their Ian. Next to him also at the head, Ivan; the two were often to be found together. Finally, Jake and next to Jarred, their last remaining Huxley.

Jarred tapped the thin computer screen with his left hand. The simple silver ring on the ring finger of his left hand glinted brightly against his tan in the bright lights as he pondered the coloured columns. The lapTab was only one millimetre thick and slid slightly back and forth as the finger landed.

‘Major Wallace's company is in a good state,’ Jarred continued. ‘Most of his men are seasoned, with only a few recent replacements, and his syns are mainly current models. The two platoons on the right flank are the same.’

The other's followed his gaze, their eyes absorbing the story the numbers told.

‘However,’ he said, ‘the two platoons on the left flank are weak. They've had too many replacements recently, and most of those are older model syns.’

‘Older models,’ Ian said. ‘They should have been retired ages ago.’

Jarred glanced at Ian and nodded slowly.

‘Yes. But circumstances have not allowed for it.’

‘That’s no excuse,’ Ian said. ‘We know those models are slowing. They should have been replaced by now.’

‘Ian, it would be desirable, at the moment, it’s not practical with only four days before combat,’ Jarred said. ‘We work with what we have. If the Major were to transfer across some of the seasoned soldiers and newer syns, I’m certain we’d have a good result.’

Jarred’s hair was short, a buttery blond, his blue eyes so pale as to appear like the waters of the Aegean in summer. The Jacks’ hair was slightly darker, Ian’s darker still, and Huxley’s was like midnight.

‘Is it really necessary?’ Ian asked. ‘Major Wallace’s company will provide the main thrust of the attack. The platoons on the left and right flanks are only there for support. Intel tells us the hill is only lightly defended.’

Jarred deliberated for a moment or two. The others waiting patiently.

‘I’m uncertain about the intel,’ Jarred said. ‘I believe it’s wrong or, at the very least, incomplete. I’m certain hill M94691 has more troops up there than reconnaissance reported. Look at what we know. The hill is used as an observation post. We know killer drones have been launched from there. That means troops to handle the maintenance, repair and support of that equipment. And more troops to guard and protect them. Add supplies and munitions, and we have a decent force. If they realise, we have a weakness, and the platoons on the right are weak, they could break through the line and cause havoc. Remember, the battlefield is only five k’s further southwest. They only need to break through at that point, and we could lose the entire front. This whole region could be lost. Nearly 400,000 humans still live in the ruins of Lyon. New Harbin is just to the northeast ...’

‘If the Major won’t make the changes?’

A sergeant and three soldiers carrying trays stopped at their table.

‘You slimes, fuck off!’

The seams on Marable’s fatigues were razor sharp. His sergeant’s insignia hung from his collar at the right angle. His hair was regulation and his skin a healthy tan.

‘Sergeant Marable?’ Jarred said, reading the sergeant’s name patch

‘Off. Fuck off. You got no right sitting when good men have to stand.’

Jarred stood, the other syns silently following him.

‘As you command, Sergeant.’

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June 9<sup>th</sup>. Bloody Tuesday.

Major Wallace had not listened. Because of that, the bodies of several hundred of the fallen and the retired lay scattered at awkward angles all over the slope of the hill. Some were only parts, missing arms, legs or their heads.

Jarred kept his head down as much as he could as he searched the torn up battleground for signs of life. A soldier squatted next to him, crying softly. Overhead, shells exploded, rockets zoomed past. IMEDS fire hit the sandbag barrier. The soldier winced and cried louder, hunching closer to Jarred. The air was so full of explosions it was difficult to hear, difficult to think.

The syns Jarred had scrounged were quickly filling the gaps left by the fallen and the retired. He was about to give up the search and concentrate on retaking terrain when he spotted a hand flutter briefly above the rim of a bomb crater two hundred metres to his left. There was no cover, and any rescue attempt would be suicide.

‘Jack,’ he snapped.

‘Jarred?’

‘There’s a wounded soldier two hundred on my right. Give me covering fire.’

‘Affirmative.’

Jack looked at Jarred, then the distance he’d have to travel under fire.

‘All you, listen,’ Jack called above the roar of battle. ‘Covering fire on my mark. Jarred?’

Jarred waited till there was a lull in the bombs and weapons fire.

‘Now!’

‘Covering fire, NOW.’

Jarred rushed from behind the cover, darted this way and that in a jigsaw pattern to make a harder target. He knew death could catch him at any second, but still he ran. At last, he stumbled over the rim, tumbling into the relative safety of the crater.

‘Sergeant Marable? Are you hurt?’

The crater rim was an inadequate cover. Anyone on top of the hill had to just look their way, and it would be all over. Quickly Jarred examined the Sargent. There was so much blood. Marable’s face was pale as snow, but his eyes flickered, and he was breathing.

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August 23rd

‘Why’d you do it to me! Why?’

The night was bright with the rising full moon. Sergeant Marable blocked Jarred and Ian’s path, the bandage on his hand white in the light. Lines of bandages under his recovery shirt were visible. His hair was long enough to be ruffled. But it was his face that revealed the most significant changes. The skin of his face was drawn tight over the bone. His tan had faded, and he looked pale and weak, except his eyes.

‘Sergeant Marable, it is good to see you on your feet.’

‘Why’d you do it to me, you fucking slime.’

Rage ran across Marable’s face, his eyes burning with hatred, his right hand formed into a tight fist. The knuckles white.

‘I don’t understand?’

‘Save me. Save my life. Why!’ He was almost screaming. His voice was ragged and full to the brim with pain. ‘How can I go home now. Everyone’ll know. They’ll all know. How can I live with that?’

‘You would have died if I hadn’t, Sargent. You’d lost too much blood ....’

‘I’d a been a hero. I’d a died a hero,’ Marable snarled. ‘But now everyone’ll know a slime saved me. I see ‘em in the barracks. They don’t say nothing, but I see it in their eyes. I hear ‘em laughing behind my back. What am I going to do?’

‘You could kill yourself,’ Ian said. ‘That would solve your problem.’

‘Ian, that’s not helpful,’ Jarred replied.

‘Suicide? How the fuck ... My family’d lose my war pension. You know what else? Wallace says I’m gonna get a medal?’

‘Congra-’

‘For what!’ he was shouting now, barely coherent. Tears ran down his cheeks. ‘All I did was get myself hit by a bunch of shrapnel, like a fucking greenie. You’ve put me in hell, you bastard. You motherless, fatherless piece of shi-’

‘We have a father,’ Ian said.

Marable glared at him. Despite the hatred filling his eyes, he was puzzled.

‘Dr. Richard Forester Solo,’ Ian said. ‘The father of the INFACCT program.’

‘Ian, enough,’ Jarrad said.

Marable moved in close to Jarred, stabbed the syn in the chest with a thick finger. Jarred didn’t react.

‘You’ve put me in hell, you fucking piece of slime. What can I do? What can I do? It’ll get out, it always gets out ....’

He stumbled away into the dark.

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### July 4th

Marable loitered behind a tree while attempting to appear not to be hiding. The sergeant, against the recommendations of the base doctor, had been drinking. A slow fire, a rage, burnt within him. He saw Jarred and stepped out.

‘Sergeant?’ Jarred stopped.

Despite waiting, despite spending nights thinking, dreaming, of this moment, Marable could think of nothing to say. To keep Jarred there till he had

the courage to act, Marable nodded at the chain and the small disk around Jarred's neck.

'I didn't know you things wore jewellery?' he said.

Jarred touched the disk.

'It records our thoughts, our knowledge and our experiences. When a syn retires, this information is transmitted to the central system for integration into future syns. Each of us has the memories of the syns that have gone before. It is how we retain and learn from experience. We develop. All new models are updated this way.'

'So, you're just a machine after all, aren't you? Like an IMEDS or a truck. I saw the way they mulch up "Retired" syns for fertiliser.'

'We are what you made us.'

Marable swayed slightly. A dribble of spittle ran down his cheek.

'Yeah? Well, I'm making you shit.'

Marable pulled out his sidearm and fired. There was a brief pulse of heat, the soft hiss of IMEDs firing, then silence.

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### July 5th

'Look, sergeant, destroying government property, you know, it's frowned upon.' Lieutenant Colonel Wallace sat at his desk, a mildly frustrated expression on his face. 'I know you've had a tough time of it, and your wounds, so, yeah, I think it's understandable.'

Sergeant Marable stood stiffly at attention. He looked and felt weak. His eyes were sallow and bloodshot, and a three-day growth covered his chin like scrubland. His gaze wandered over the Colonel's head.

'This is what we're going to do.' The Wallace looked up and smiled as if he had good news. 'We're sending you home on the next shuttle. You're going to be doing some glad-handing for a while, chivvy up John and Jane public, let 'em know what we're fighting for. Good hotels, good food, good drink. Maybe a syn to keep you company. Just for a month or two until you're fully recovered, and

then ... then we'll see. And good news. We're promoting you. Command Sergeant. The extra chevrons will look great along with that medal of yours. You're a hero, man.'

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July 23<sup>rd</sup>

Marable, his duffle over his shoulder, stumbled out of the shuttle towards the terminal. Out of battle fatigues for once, his awards, commendations and the new medal sparkled on his chest. Yet his head was bowed, like an old man with a burden he could no longer carry. Around him, passing him, the other soldiers left the shuttle jibber-jabbering with the delight of being away from the war.

'Command Sergeant Marable.'

Marable knew the voice. A week ago, he'd killed its owner. Then he remembered, not killed, retired.

'Jarred,' Marable whispered.

He didn't want to look up, a battle raged inside him, but Marable found he had to.

'Yes.'

Marable saw a cookie-cutter copy of Jarred.

'When ... when were you, you know?' Marable whispered.

'I became operational three weeks ago. I'm the last of the Jarred series. The Jayden series next will be.'

'You know ... you know then,' he spluttered. 'You'll know everything.'

'Let me take that for you.'