

The Beast in the Trenches

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The sky was on fire.

As beginnings go, I think it has poetry. We were at war – when are we not? – and the world was burning beneath us. Beneath me. The air tasted of smoke and the heat pressed down on me, like the hand of the God-Emperor. My ears were ringing, but I could hear men screaming, up and down the trench-line. They were always screaming. Crying and wailing. My regiment was mostly made up of cowards and children, much to my chagrin.

The ferrocrete duckboards buckled beneath me as I pushed myself to my feet and fumbled for the laspistol on my hip. The mud – we'd taken to calling it 'the soup', for obvious reasons – beneath the duckboards was boiling from the heat of the barrage. The trench was sloughing into a new shape around me as I stumbled towards the nearest screams. The walls bubbled, bulging outwards or collapsing inwards. The ferrocrete frames of the line were cracked and pushed out of joint. Sometimes whole

sections of the line – and everything in them – vanished into the soup. Like they'd never existed at all.

War is a hungry beast, and it gobbles its prey. A regiment can die in a moment, triumph can turn to tragedy, victory to defeat. Only by maintaining discipline can the hunger of war be held at bay. But discipline, like ferrocrete, can crack and burst, and vanish under the mud, unless someone tends to it.

Men moved around me, but I barely saw them – grey shadows, uniforms coated with mud and ash, environment masks giving everyone the same inhuman features. I didn't often wear my mask, despite the way the heat bit at my lungs and sinuses. I wanted them to see me. To see my face. To see that I wasn't like them. They needed to be reminded of that. I needed to be reminded of that. Standards – discipline – had to be maintained.

Coughing, I stumbled down the line, shoving men aside. They didn't protest, or I didn't hear them if they did. They saw my face, the black peaked cap, the coat – stained with mud though it was – and they knew me. Knew who I was, what I was. And they straightened at their positions. They went quiet. Like good soldiers.

But where there are good soldiers there are bad soldiers. There are always bad soldiers, in every regiment. The lazy and the cowardly. The unscrupulous and the mad. The God-Emperor saw them, and I saw them too. I had been trained my whole life to see them. To see the signs of faltering courage in a man, sometimes before the soldier in question even realised it. And then, to act.

Cowardice could spread like an illness, if left unchecked. And not just cowardice. Licentiousness, disrespect... these found fertile soil in untended souls. If not dealt with, they could bring a regiment to its knees. Cripple it, or even destroy it.

But not that day. Not then, with the sky burning with chemical fire and the trenches turning to soup around me. The screaming was bad for morale. Bad for the regiment. And I knew my duty.

Lasistol in hand, I swept down the line, moving quicker. The longer the screams went on, the worse the effect would be. Another lesson learned in the schola progenium. They'd taught me so many valuable things, there. I give thanks to the God-Emperor every night for those times, gruelling though they were.

The trenches I passed through were irregular canyons of mud, bolstered by support slabs of ferrocrete. In places, pre-fab bunkers of stone and metal had been sunk into the mud, their regimental markings obscured by grime and damage. Heavy environment netting had been strung over the tops of some places, in order to keep out the worst of the inclement weather. It didn't work here – it rarely worked anywhere. But we strung it regardless, as the manuals insisted. We dug our trenches to regulation depth, despite the mud, and set our guns and placed our emplacements.

There is a right way to do things, and a wrong way. I know this. Another lesson, and one I took readily to heart. The right way was the way the God-Emperor wished it to be. The wrong way was the way of heresy, of disrespect and ill-discipline.

Armaplas firing pavises lined the top of the trenches, and men lined up behind them, standing on overturned crates or ferrocrete slabs. The sound of las-fire split the air as the soldiers vented their frustrations on the unseen enemy. It was always the same – during or just after a barrage, they would expend valuable charges from their lasrifles. The officers had given up trying to stop them from shooting at ghosts.

An odd word, that. Ghosts. But appropriate, I think, given our foe. They pounded us from afar, rarely daring to draw close. Rarely deigning, I should say. I couldn't remember a day without their guns. Without that hateful rhythm. Even when they were silent, the air echoed with them. I couldn't escape, even in sleep. If not for my training, I might well have been driven mad by it.

Some, among my charges, had been. The incessant bombardment

ate away at their simple psyches, breaking their minds and spirits. When that happened, I had to be quick I couldn't allow the weakness to spread.

I reached the source of the screams after a few moments of laboured stumbling, and shoved my way through the grey crowd of masked loiterers. 'Back to your positions,' I growled, shoving men against the sides of the trench. 'Get back Back!'

They muttered darkly, their voices muffled by their masks, but they knew better than to argue. Arguing with a commissar was the equivalent of sleeping beneath a battle tank – one could get away with it, but only rarely.

When the space had cleared, I saw the screamer. He was young, and had torn his mask off, exposing milk-pale features and eyes so blue that I thought at first he'd suffered some injury. His uniform was spattered with mud and ash, and his weapon was nowhere to be seen. A medical corpsman crouched beside him, the caduceus on his shoulder plate faded and all but scraped away. The screamer did not appear to be injured. I holstered my weapon.

'Why is he screaming?'

The corpsman looked up at me, eyes wide. He mumbled something, his voice muffled by his mask I had never met a corpsman of any use. I shoved him aside and caught the screamer by the collar. He thrashed in my grip, boneless, like a worm. He babbled nonsense in that slurring dialect of Low Gothic shared by most of the regiment. I had never bothered to learn it, as most of them eventually figured out the right way to talk

'On your feet,' I said, dragging him upright. 'Answer me.'

His hand flapped uselessly at the wall of the trench, where bones were being squeezed from the mud like excrement. Skulls and femurs and shattered ribcages. The refuse of the battlefield. The mud cooked the dead, if the corpsmen didn't get to them first. It boiled away the meat and muscle, leaving only bone. I paused, taking in the sight.

Sometimes, when the trenches clenched just right, the bones surfaced. They poured down and pooled across the floor of the trench. Most were reabsorbed before the trench settled, but sometimes they remained. I shoved the man back and plucked a steaming skull free of the soup. I held it up before him.

‘This? This is what you’re screaming about?’ I caught him again, before he could turn away. He was a coward, then. Like all of them. What use is a soldier that can’t face death? Like a gun that won’t fire.

The air shuddered as the dull crump of enemy artillery sounded. The trench shook and twisted as men lost their footing or fought to brace the ferrocrete slabs that held the bulk of the mud at bay. Fearful eyes darted in wild circles behind masks. A babble of voices rose. Between the mud and the screamer’s wails, they were on edge.

Discipline had to be maintained. And I had to be the one to do it.

I caught him by his flak armour and dragged him close. ‘Be quiet,’ I said. ‘Quiet!’ But he didn’t stop. Perhaps he couldn’t. I am no expert in the ways of the mind. Perhaps his had broken in such a way that the world about him had been reduced to something so infinitely terrifying that he could think of no other option than to scream and scream and scream... the noise of it was like a knife, digging into my head. Worse than the guns, almost.

I had to silence him. For the good of the regiment. For the sake of discipline. I dragged him towards the collapsed wall of the trench, and the bones. He tried to twist away, hands flapping at my arm. Weak blows. Weak mind. Weak link. I tossed the skull I held aside, and drove him face-first into the tide of bones.

‘Idiot,’ I snapped. ‘Coward. The dead can’t hurt you. But I will, if you don’t stop this foolishness.’

He struggled in my grip, whining. The corpsman had fallen over and scrambled back, and the others were watching. Staring.

I wanted them to. I wanted them to see that there was nothing to be frightened of here. Nothing except me.

His scream changed, became a wail of desolation – a child’s cry. Weak, as I said. Too young for the battlefield, perhaps. But the God-Emperor had chosen him – had brought him here. The least he could do was show some courage. That was all He asked of His servants. The courage to do what was necessary, whatever the cost. I said this to him, to them all, as I held him there, in the mud, ignoring his struggles. The opportunity to impart a lesson was not to be ignored, even amidst the confusion of an artillery barrage.

His struggles grew more frenzied. I forced him deeper, until the bones were tumbling over my arms and slapping against my chest. His boots caught me in the shin as his hands dug futilely into the mud either side of his head. He clawed at the wall of the trench, still screaming, though I could only hear the barest edge of it over the guns.

And then, all at once, he went still. It was so sudden, I almost released him. But I didn’t. I held him for a moment more. Maybe two. I had to make sure, you see. He needed to understand the crime he had committed. Cowardice was the weed in the garden of victory. Fear, the vice of the weak. And I would suffer no weakness in my regiment.

When I finally hauled him back, it was clear that I had overestimated him. He had been weaker than I had imagined. I knew, in that moment, that I had done him a favour, and it annoyed me. Weakness was to be punished, not rewarded.

He was a deadweight in my hands and I let him fall. His body crashed to the duckboards and lay unmoving. His blue eyes, wide and empty, stared at nothing. I felt the gazes of the rest settle on me like hands and I turned, meeting their bewildered stares unflinchingly.

‘What are you looking at?’ I said, softly.

They said nothing. Could say nothing. Their lives were mine. To weigh and judge as I saw fit. And they knew it. Even as they knew I would not judge them unfairly. Some commissars might – petty tyrants, hiding behind His authority. But I was not one of them. The God-Emperor's hand was at my shoulder, and His light in me.

Sometimes, I wondered if they could see it. If they can see it. The light, I mean. Or were their souls too simple to perceive such glorious luminescence? A question I have often asked myself, if I'm being honest. Am I blessed among the faithful? Or is such grace the common burden of humanity, shared by all, whether they realise it or not?

I confess, it troubles me.

But at that moment, I was not thinking of grace or light. I was thinking of the dead man at my feet, and the way his eyes stared up past me, as if seeking the stars. Blue eyes. No one in the regiment had blue eyes. I know, because it is my job to know such things. When everyone wears masks for the majority of a thirty-six Terran standard-hour day, you learn to recognise them by their eyes. By their voices, and the way they walk.

I recognised him, I thought. Not by name. But his eyes... had they changed? Minor mutation wasn't unheard of, in such conditions as these. Another sign of weakness. His crimes compounded themselves, even in death. Or perhaps there was some toxin in the air, or in the soup, that had changed him. The thought sent a chill through me, and I admit, I glanced then at the mask hanging from my belt, and cursed my bravado.

It was only because of this momentary failing that I saw the locket. A little thing of gold. It had escaped his armour during his struggles. It lay across his unmoving chest, the tarnished gilt all but obscured by filth. I reached down and tore it loose.

I let it dangle from my fingers and spin, and I saw that there was a catch to it. Something inside, perhaps. A secret thing.

Secrets were another crack in the wall of discipline. Soldiers were not allowed secrets. Their lives were best kept simple and uncomplicated – scraped sharp and straight, like the edge of a bayonet.

More weakness. Another crime for the tally. His death was more justified with every passing moment, and I felt a flush of satisfaction. The God-Emperor had guided my hand, as He had done so many times before.

‘Get him up,’ I said. The corpsman knelt beside the screamer as I studied the locket. Despite myself, I was curious. I wondered what it held. A picture, a message – something else? I closed my hand around it. ‘What are you waiting for? I said get him up.’

‘He’s dead,’ the corpsman said, in a hollow voice.

‘I know. I know a dead man when I see one.’ I stuffed the locket into my coat. ‘It’s just as well. The penalty for contraband is the same as that for cowardice... summary execution. The sentence has been administered.’ I looked around. ‘The rest of you, get back to your posts.’

The corpsman looked up at me. His gaze was unreadable. Brown eyes. Placid. A soldier’s eyes. ‘What about him?’

I looked down at the body. ‘Feed him to the soup.’