

WARHAMMER
40,000

DEATH'S SHEPERD

ANDY SMILLIE

A FLESH TEARERS SHORT STORY

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A Flesh Tearers story by Andy Smillie

Four hundred million lie dead.

The world reeks of blood.

I can smell it over the ash-rich fires that light the horizon, over the putrid stench of the dead. It permeates the stale musk of the still-living, the last of the Zurconian Regulars who are gathered around me, poised for one final charge. Like a murderous siren it calls me back to war. My pulse speeds with every breath. I inhale the copper tang of a world soaked in arterial fluid, relishing it like a starving man might savour a meal. It has been almost an hour since I killed.

'Children of the Emperor.'

I turn to face the Regulars. Their breath fogs the night air as they summon their courage, hearts thumping in their chests. The Guardsmen no longer resemble the soldiers I had joined a year ago. The fire in their eyes is no longer born of hope. Instead, it is a murderous ember, flickering with malice. The freshly spilled blood daubed on their faces, echoing the Chapter symbol adorning my pauldron, is neither their own nor the enemy's. When the rations were exhausted, I had only been prepared to lead the strong.

'Sons of Zurcon.'

Starved of ammunition, the Regulars wield their lasguns like clubs. Most have fixed knives and blades to the barrels, binding them with boot laces, webbing and belts stripped from the dead. Others clutch farming implements and improvised weapons. I move to stand at their head, and raise my crozius to the sky. The heavens are as coal-black as my armour, the light from the neighbouring stars secreted behind kilometres of choking cinder, a blanket of darkness thrown up by the magma warheads and apocalypse missiles used to prosecute this war.

'My battle-brothers.'

Behind my skull-helm, I grimace. The Zurconians are not of the Blood. They are not Flesh Tearers. They are no more my *brothers* than the enemy we face. It is a necessary lie. Courage will grant them far more protection than any flak-vest. It will keep them advancing when instinct screams at them to retreat. General and standard bearer. Warlord and preacher. I am both shepherd and slaughter master. Where I lead, few will survive, and so I armour them with falsehood.

'Today, you redeem your world in the eyes of the Emperor.'

Downhill, across the plateau, a war-ravaged expanse of agri-soil scarred by artillery and churned to mulch by blood-stained boots, the Zurconian Royals are spread out before us. Heretics, mistaken in their belief that the old families deserved to rule in place of the Emperor-appointed governor. Trench lines, dugouts and gun pits cut across the landscape like a tortured mosaic. Piles of our dead pave a way through the minefields and razorwire. I smile. War is the greatest of all levellers, granting even the weak and the dying a chance to serve their Emperor. The previous dawn, I marched our wounded downhill to draw out the enemy positions and waste their ammunition. By my estimate, less than two hundred souls stood before us, only a fraction of which still had rounds for their weapons. The battle will not last long.

Today, you will prove yourselves worthy of a freedom bought with Cretacian blood.'

Centuries ago, Master Amit expunged the taint of the archenemy and liberated the Zurcon system. Yet the *nobles* of the royal houses had chosen to repay our sacrifice with treachery. It was an error none of Zurconian blood would live to regret.

'Bring them death!'

I charge. The fifty remaining Zurconian Regulars echo my roar and break into a run. It will take us three minutes to reach the trench line. Pinpricks of light stab towards us as the enemy open fire. Two men scream as they are cut down.

'Spread out,' I growl.

The Royals are battle-hardened. These are ranging shots, an attempt to find us in the darkness. They will save what remains of their solid-shot ammunition until we are close. Las-fire patters over my armour, as ineffectual as rainwater. I continue onwards, counting muzzle flashes, sprinting towards the largest concentration of enemy. My helm's autosenses dim, protecting my eyes from the sudden bursts of light as the Royals open up with heavy bolters and autocannons. The ground chums up around me, whipped into the air by explosive rounds. The

Regulars are dying. Their anguished cries compete with the bark of gunfire as they are torn apart, blasted to fleshy gobbets by high-calibre shells. A burst of rounds slams into my breastplate and pauldron, spinning me to the ground.

'Kill until killed!' I roar as I recover my footing. The attack must not falter.

An instant later I am among the trenches. *I am fury* is my only thought as I kill a Royal, crushing his head between my elbow and the trench wall. I kill another, driving my fist through his chest. Another dies to my crozius, his torso shorn in half by an upwards blow. I grin as bone snaps and men scream. Gore splatters my armour, pooling in the lacerations and bullet holes, cleansing me of war's touch. I kill and I kill, cutting and bludgeoning, snarling in the torturous moments between kills.

Seven minutes. Seven short minutes and I am forced to stop. Forced to slow my pulse, to drive the rage from my veins. The enemy are dead.

Three of the Regulars remain. Troopers Cesan and Booy, and Sergeant Artair. They stumble towards me, exhausted. They are all that remains of Zurconian blood.

'We are saved,' Cesan mutters, his eyes wide with disbelief.

I growl. I am no saviour. I am a destroyer.

I smash my crozius into the side of Cesan's head. His skull bursts under the impact, showering Booy in clumps of brain matter. My reverse stroke kills him before he can react. Sergeant Artair drops to his knees.

'W... why?' he croaks, his voice as frail as his ruined body.

'Why?' I bark, lifting him up by his neck so that his face is level with my helm. 'A man who sins in ignorance is twice damned, a fool who lacks the strength of mind to determine his own fate. I came here to honour Amit's victory and remind you of the debt you owe the Emperor. Yet I find you have squandered your freedom and become weak with opulence. You have allowed the proud and the corrupt to take hold of your world.'

'But we... We have won. We have taken vengeance on the Royals as you said we would.'

He is right. The Royals are dead. All of them. But vengeance, vengeance was never enough. I remove my skull-helm, letting the terror in his eyes find the hatred in mine.

'I am wrath,' I snarl as I tear out his heart.