

Isaac's Sacrifice

Isaac racked the bolt on his Prussian made submachine gun. The sacred oils that served as lubricant for the inner workings of the firearm made the operation eerily smooth and turned the feeling of metal sliding on metal to a sensation of a spirit walking on water. He looted that gun off a corpse just two days ago. The Free State's troops mounted an assault on the Heretic bunker to the east - most likely in search of the same artifact that Isaac and his band of Pilgrims are here for: a wooden splinter of the altar cross that once stood in the Basilica of the Annunciation in Nazareth. The cross was first saved in the year of the Three Battles before the Third Circle had the chance to capture it and then was tragically lost during the Wars of Triclavianism. The circumstances of its destruction are unknown but many splinters still exist as reliquaries in the care of the Principality. Not this one. Jonah, may the Lord forever bless our chosen Prophet, learned the whereabouts of this artifact from the Heavenly Voice itself and thus rallied the holy Procession. More than a third of the Pilgrims that Isaac initially set out with are no longer part of this sacred mission. Even with no bullets piercing the air or artillery shells flying overhead, crossing the No Man's Land is lethal. The careless were cut to ribbons by the Heretic's living barbed wire, the unlucky vaporised by landmines.

In the night of the eighth day, five fellow Pilgrims were stolen by a Trench Horror - an entity born on the ancient battlefield that swore allegiance to no one but itself. Some say they are a rogue breed of the Sultanate's abominations they foolishly lost control over and stalk the quiet parts of No Man's Land ever since. Others say they are simply Demons from Hell. Isaac did not care. The night he ever laid eyes on one he and his band grabbed what they could and marched for twenty two hours straight and had terrible nightmares since.

Sour rain started prattling on Isaac's hood. The failed Prussian assault meant that the forces of the Beast might be still recovering - even if ultimately repelled, an attack of the Stosstruppen will always leave behind a big dent in the enemy's defenses and countless casualties. Yet the enemy now knows that the location of the prized reliquary has been compromised and will attempt to move it soon.

A wave of whispers washed over him. The Ecclesiastic Prisoners started saying their last Prayers, broken by moans and pleas to our Lord, begging for forgiveness and redemption. The Lord will provide soon, Isaac was sure of it.

Jonah read Psalms from a tattered booklet to inspire and soothe the penitent and signaled Isaac to help rig the explosives onto one of their scarred bodies. Luckily, they came across an abandoned artillery position not too long ago and after fastening nails, pieces of barbed wire and other bits of metal to the shells they had the perfect weapon for their front line. The woman Isaac tied one of those bombs to was shaking in anticipation, tears streaming down her face as she cited the Litanies under her breath.

In thirty seconds they would scale over the parapet and charge the Heretic's position to explode in righteous glory. Unnerving whistling pierced the rain. The blasphemers started working their mortars and the first shells shook the earth outside the Pilgrim's trench, sending showers of mud their way.

No one flinched. Jonah closed his booklet with a boom that seemed to drown out the noise of war for a second and the Prisoners began their assault. The first three were cut down by machine gun fire before they could burst into full gait. Another one hit a landmine halfway across the open field and his carried shell went off along with it, leaving no trace of a man behind. Two more managed to drop into the Heretic's trench, one of them falling onto a Legionaire's bayonet, losing consciousness before she could activate the detonator. The last one however found the machine gunner's nest. Despite his guts being pierced by no less than six bullets, our Lord held his benevolent hand over this man and the ensuing explosion promised eternal damnation for the gunner, his loader and three

other faithless soldiers while creating a suitable opening for the main charge. In the meanwhile, Isaac donned his Capirote and he was filled with bliss as the Hymns of Creation sung by angels fogged his weary soul. The cries of pain became angelic voices singing Praise to the Lord and the lead spitting barrels became fanfares to honor the victory of all that is Good. He leapt across the foxholes and barbed wire together with his brethren, into the breach the penitent created a few heartbeats ago. Scrambling over a few ugly carcasses he found a foothold on the muddy duckboards inside the trench.

His submachine started barking the melody of certain death, expending thirty rounds in one long burst of fully automatic fire, felling several satanist soldiers in the process.

The unholy pyramid-bunker was just up ahead, the path to it crested with already rotting corpses of Prussians and Heretics alike. Isaac's long burst bought his comrades valuable time to pull the strings on their stick grenades and two of those sailed forcefully into the foreboding, pitch black opening of the bunker. No explosions could be heard, just a subtle quake and then the pyramid belched out a cloud of black fog and the smell of blood. Undeterred, Isaac thrust a fresh magazine into his gun and led the charge. The inside of the bunker felt like another realm. An evil realm. Dozens of candles burned with sickly flames and the stench of sulfur penetrated the long clogged filters of the Pilgrims' gas masks. The Sturmtruppen came close to their goal, evident by the tangled carcasses on the floor. Some still in the loathsome embrace of their enemies as they danced the Waltz of Death just a few nights ago, hacking at each other with hatchets and clubs. Yet their souls could not be further apart. Isaac muttered a prayer to honor their sacrifice and the candles appeared to abhor the Holy Words and fluttered in angry response. Amen.

At the back of the fortification stood a concrete plinth, holding up a small box of rusted iron. The box was marked with the most vile and perverse blasphemies that Isaac ever saw and the Hymns in his Capirote fell mute in an instant. He exchanged looks with his fellows.

Their iron masks hid their emotions but Isaac understood that he should be the one to remove the object from the pedestal. He brushed away the hand of a Prussian that came oh so close to retrieving the reliquary. Expecting the worst, he snatched it like a snake catches its prey, yet to their surprise nothing happened. After a moment of perplexion, Isaac exploded into a full sprint, the coveted treasure clasped under his left armpit. The exit seemed so far away. His lungs started burning, as if he had been sustaining this frantic rush for hours already. For a while, the bunker turned into an impossible maze with unsettling twists and turns but suddenly the sound of war returned and so did the rain. Outside again from whence they came, the pyramid finally spat them out into the bloody trench.

Ambush.

From a previously unseen dugout sprang a group of malnourished satanist troopers armed with pistols and melee weapons. Isaac clamped the stock of his submachine gun between his arm and body and began to fire it one handed. They were too close. His burst grazed one of them but this did not stop their charge. The enemy crashed into Isaac and his comrades. The slippery mud provided no chance of staying upright and they all tumbled to the ground, deadly metal just inches away from their vitals. Isaac pulled his knife while protecting the sacred treasure with all his might. Hopeless. The Heretic's bladed club slammed into Isaac's arm and shoulder once. Twice. Three times more while the Pilgrim's knife failed to penetrate armour. Next to him on the duckboards, a few pistol shots rang out. He couldn't see who pulled the trigger and who was hit. The enemy was now sitting on top of him, battering his already mangled arm into a pulp. Satanic hatred burned in their eyes.

Then another shot. This time it definitely pierced Isaac's side. Dazed, he looked over to his comrade who - in a similar predicament - blindly fired his weapon in a panic, trying to ward off his assailant. He felt how the stinking foe on top pulled out the rusty metal box out from the mess of gore

that used to be an arm. Victory turned defeat in mere seconds, Isaac was frothing at the mouth with rage, yet his body refused to obey his calls for revenge. The vile Heretic raised his weapon for a finishing blow when his head exploded in a spray of gore. The crack of the responsible gunshot echoed down the trenches and the penitent girl tossed away a bolt action rifle. Her belly was still oozing blood from a bayonet wound that she now pressed on again with her palm. There was no sign of the artillery shell Isaac tied to her back. Without a word she grabbed the iron box from the dead satanist and ran off into No Man's Land.