

Live Ammo

by Edward Bolme
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Overhead, the rippling thunder of another dropship tore across the sky as 3rd squad, 3rd platoon picked its way through the Hellthorne forest.

Potnek glanced up to try to spot the fiery contrails through the branches overhead. “I can’t see anything,” he muttered. Seen through the lenses of his gas mask, it seemed a light fog blanketed the woods, but he knew the mist was a thin coating of condensation on the inside of the mask. The lenses were supposed to be fog-proof, and maybe they would be if it weren’t so hot. If he weren’t so hot.

“Scared, soldier?” asked squad leader Mandag.

“N-no,” said Potnek bravely.

“My arse.”

Potnek exhaled heavily, making his mask puff beneath his helmet. The acrid stink of the mask’s virgin rubber smothered his senses, but it overcame neither the alien scents of the forest, nor the unmistakable smell of fear that escaped from the beads of sweat that trickled down his face.

“I haven’t ever—well, it’s just—”

“You’ve never faced the enemy.”

Potnek drew a shuddering breath. “Yeah.”

“You’ve drilled with live ammo, right?”

Potnek nodded, remembering the one live-fire drill in his two weeks’ emergency-levy training. He’d crawled through obstacles while bolter rounds cracked through the air no more than a meter over his head.

“Same thing,” grunted Mandag. “They just aim lower in real battles.”

“Great.”

“Look on the bright side, soldier,” said Mandag,

clapping him on the shoulder. “You get to shoot back!”

Potnek chuckled, although it came out as a bit of a nervous titter. “Yeah, live ammo.”

“S’right,” said Mandag. “And they’re as scared of it as you are.”

“But they’re bugs,” protested Potnek.

Mandag’s face turned dark. “That’s enough chattering in the ranks, soldier.”

The squad trailed the rest of the platoon through the forest to a wide clearing, widened even further by the fact that numerous trees had been felled to build a makeshift barricade and firing line around the perimeter of the firebase. The underbrush had been burned away by flamers, and Potnek immediately recognized that it had been done to facilitate the movement of reserves, ammunition and the wounded. He felt his fear rising once again, and with it, his bile.

He glanced to the bunker at the center, and saw an imposing man in a high-peaked red officer’s cap. Hands held calmly behind his back, he directed the defenses of the firebase.

“He looks so calm,” said Potnek, “how does he do it?”

Mandag turned his head. “Commissar Schmidt?”

Potnek nodded. “Yeah. With no armor, he could die as—”

Mandag rounded on his recruit. “You think he fears death?” he hissed in the greenhorn’s face. He held his bolter pistol up, nearly striking Potnek in the nose with the blunt iron clip. “Look at this, boy!

The God-Emperor of Mankind blesses every round in this clip! Each round gives its life for one chance to blow the head off a stinking 'nid. These bolts have no fear, and by the Emperor, you'd better not waste their chance by quaking in your boots! We're all expendable, boy; we're all ammunition in the Emperor's war to save our race! Remember that!"

Just as abruptly, he spun around and yelled out, "You heard the lieutenant, 3rd squad! Over to the rampart! Move!" He stormed off to the barricade, leaving Potnek to wonder how Mandag could hear the lieutenant's orders while serving up a full charge of invective on one raw recruit.



Pressed up against the massive tree trunks, Potnek felt a sense of security. He was protected, he had live ammo, he was ready.

Until they came. Suddenly countless swarming bugs erupted as if from nowhere, shattering the quiet. The forest writhed with their teeming masses. The weapons of the Steel Legion erupted in a thundering roar even as the first wave of tyranids crashed against the barricade.

Wide-eyed, screaming behind his mask, Potnek unloaded his first clip on full auto and ducked down. A few frantic, fumbling centuries later, he finally slapped in a second clip as a tiny tyranid leaped over the bastion and charged into the compound.

"Watch your targets!" yelled Mandag, audible only through the earpieces inside Potnek's helmet. Potnek looked up and saw a huge multi-legged monstrosity with great, curving claws starting to step across the logs. Its shadow washed over

Potnek as he pulled the trigger again. He blew a line of holes in the beast's carapace, and walked the bolter up the thorax to its head. He struggled to keep the barking bolter on target as he emptied its clip into the creature's cranium; round after round pulverized the breast's brain, causing a rain of dripping gore.

For a moment, the tyranid stood there, swaying. Then, blood erupting from its throat as it screamed, it began hacking at the logs all about Potnek, blindly trying to chop him in two with its razor-sharp, two-meter claws.

Potnek panicked. He ran for the bunker and crashed into it, backpedaling as if to push himself into its armored walls. The gas mask smothered his rapid breathing, and he ripped it off. Immediately he regretted it; the alien smell of the forest, the awful cloying scent of the 'nids, and the stench of human viscera all exploded in his mind at once.

Breathing through his mouth, he slapped in a fresh clip and looked up, hoping to see a dropship of reinforcements, but saw instead a quartet of flying tyranids swooping down, armed with vile guns. Glancing around, he saw Commissar Schmidt nearby, calmly directing the defense.

Potnek leaped to protect the Commissar and opened up on the incoming creatures. He felt a thump in his chest, and felt suddenly cold. Looking down, he saw a gaping wound at his diaphragm. Behind him, as through water, he heard Schmidt directing fire at the aerial attack.

"My one shot," Potnek thought, "and the Commissar lives."

He tried to raise his bolter once more, but couldn't.