

SHE LED HIM HOME

An original short story by David Goforth

*I wished for nothing more than to have greeted you
in person when you arrived in...*

France.

Out of all of the things for the recruits to have the most excitement about, this country took the cake. For nights after the news of Kenneth's relocation from the African campaign at the convenience of his commanding officer, he wondered if he would come to regret his transfer. He arrived in the country before the boys that had been assigned to him. All of them were fresh. They couldn't shut up about seeing where the real fighting got good and ignored the scenes of desolate towns and ruined vineyards.

The sergeant major stared down the vacant cobblestone streets, half expecting to hear the lullaby of death ring out of the silence, but the birds seemed to be singing instead. As he let the boys take a break from marching, he slipped the fingers of his hand into the pocket of his long coat and brushed up against the letter that he

had read over religiously, feeling the slickness of the ink that made up every precious word – all that was left of her. He avoided looking back at the young men.

How could you call fighting good when it resulted in the death of good people?

"Kenneth." It was one of his spotters. "You see those off in the distance, right?"

He turned, putting his hand to shade his eyes. "Yeah," he said, looking back to see the wave of grins roll over the members of his battalion. "Storm clouds."

I'm sure, after enduring the hot African plains, you've come to miss...

The rain didn't stop for hours. It didn't come down lightly, either.

If he wasn't babysitting rookies, he would've had them march right through it without any breaks. He didn't think too much of letting the boys throw down their packs against the wall of the old bakery and throw off their shirts.

"If anyone of you lets go of your rifle, though," he told them. "I'll be the one to shoot you."

They all took to the rain rather nicely. They were stupid fools who were most likely to die the moment they saw combat, but they were happy. The battle loomed somewhere on the hundreds of miles still left to cross on foot.

"How many times have you had your transport blown to pieces, sarge?"

He didn't even want to think about the actual number. He knew the kid was asking how many times he had almost lost his life. He stared back at the boy with a stone-faced expression and back at the recruit and ask him how many times the boy had slept with a girl.

No surprise to anyone, the number turned out to be quite high. At least, for them.

I hope, at the very least, not as much as the one who has waited for...

"You," Kenneth decided, placing a firm hand on the boy's shoulder. "What's your name?"

"Jason Osiah, sir."

Kenneth shot a glare down both directions of the line. After they tired themselves, the boys spent the hours lounging up against the painted mural depicting the town, glorified by a static sun always shining from behind the building and in line with the horizon. The boys used their packs as recliners and cradled their rifles like infants as instructed.

"Listen here, kids," Kenneth said. "Jason deserves your respect. He's taking point today."

There came a gentle wave of clapping from the other boys. With that, they were back to skulking the skeleton of the town like vultures looking for the rats looking for shelter.

"Rats," he heard a boy call them. "How could the rats be out with all the noise from the storm?"

Nevertheless, I can wait no longer. The roar of storm is all I hear now at...

"Night is falling, and the rain has stopped but there's still thunder," a kid noticed. "You don't think that the thunder is actually—"

"We're coming up on the next town, boys. No games this time."

The boys moved like ants in two rows. Kenneth counted the beats between each clap of thunder. He had gotten good at counting when the shell would strike its target. He half-expected to hear screams of terror accompany the impact.

He sent a prayer to God, both that the boys wouldn't end up doing the screaming.

"If we go into fighting, find cover. Remember, we're here to stay alive longer than the Krauts."

Their bolts of lightning have struck close friends, people I have known for most of my...

"Life," Kenneth said. "What a god-forsaken waste."

His boys huddled behind him, shivering and weeping as he counted the bodies of the dead surrounding them. His gut sank when one of the radio operators briefed us over the situation in the center square, demanding that all available units be sent for the reinforcement of the point. His gut told him it was a hopeless cause and that he'd be charged with assisting suicide if he sent his boys there. He listened to his gut instead of the radio operator.

For many of his kids, this was the first lick of it.

The first taste of what it actually meant to be a soldier. This wasn't an ennobling experience. This was a harrowing experience. They had started on the same path of bitterness that he had started in '41.

His nostrils flared, taking in the scent of smoldering embers and the decaying scent of flesh. One of the boys heaved at his feet.

Kenneth unfolded his arms, straightened the rifle hanging from the harness on his pack, and began to move through the labyrinth of corpses. He even laughed. "You think this is bad?" he asked. "Wait until you see what they do to the innocents."

I promised I would wait until it was no longer safe for me to stay...

"Here," Kenneth said, finger pressed against the map. He met the eyes of the boys encircling a table with a map on it. "Once their position is knocked out, dealing the killing blow will be a piece of cake."

This was the last town for a good hundred miles. If he and his boys won this fight, they could have all the R&R they wanted for days. He'd make sure of it. It's the least he could do for those that lived through it.

He was listening to his gut again and it was saying that he couldn't babysit them any longer. He couldn't keep them strictly on the objective of staying alive. They now

had a mission which would require them to fulfill the soldier's duty to the fullest, and it terrified him.

This whole operation terrified him for several reasons.

One, they were about to go up against one of the most desperate units in weeks.

Two, they were about to go head-first into fighting the desperate and most volatile remains of a German regiment in the country with little intel about what that regiment had left in the town.

Three, he had direct orders from his higher-ups that he couldn't keep dodging the bullets for his boys.

Four – and this one struck him the fiercest – he was where she was when he met her four years ago.

He would inevitably break two promises at the same time. One, to her. The other, to his boys.

And I'm afraid that time has come. I've poured more hope in this letter than it...

"Deserves?" the blond-haired recruit spat, the wild look stampeding between his eyes. He had extended an arm back towards where the battle took place. "No one, sir, deserves that at all. With all due respect, I don't know how you could imagine anyone deserving that happening to them. It's hellish. It's sick. It's unthinkable."

"Jameson," Kenneth said softly, arms folded behind his back and head tilted down. "You don't understand that they did the same thing to our innocents."

He refused to admit that he imagined that happening to her.

The recruit left the tent, bitter tears falling from his face and tense fists punching through the cloth covering the entrance. He ignored Kenneth's attempts at calling him back.

When you come here, which I know you will not rest until you do, I will be....

"Gone, then?"

The boys stood in a line in front of him. Kenneth had his arms crossed, watching each boy nod at him. Kenneth brushed his hand across the whiskers adorning his chin with patient strokes. He looked into the mirror of their fear - the same fear that he experienced nightly. Jameson had taken his stuff but if he was serious about giving up, he'd have to march on his own back to the nearest allied outpost to even think of getting a ride home – if they would let him. If command asked, Kenneth would support the boy's decision.

"So be it. We're not done here. I still have one last place I want to see before we leave."

Do not look for me, beloved. Although the shouts of the damned echo outside my door, I have found a new home among the...

"Eternal," Kenneth whispered under his breath. He survived the war. She didn't. He rubbed his thumb across the chiseled lettering of her name on the monument in the

Plateau des Glières, honoring the members of the French resistance. The monument reached for the heaven, almost leading him to believe that it was trying to bring her back down. It was then that he noticed the hundreds of names covering the bright limestone memorial and letting that same thumb rub against one. "They are eternal because they live in our memories."