25/12/14

**1**

The lorry hits a pothole on the frozen road, and we bounce nearly out of the bed. “Easy, ya daft cunt!” yells one of the boys. “Me mum drives better.”

A gentle laugh carries throughout, drowned out by the growling of the engine; the sickly-sweet exhaust fills the covered bed of the truck—a thin, holey, weather-stained green canvas tarpaulin, enough to keep us dry but not enough to keep out the bitter air. The cold light from the sun, obscured by the clouds, finds one of those holes; a shaft of light breaks through, enough to show the mixed expressions of the boys: some stare ahead, their eyes glazed over with terror and regret; some smile and chat with their brothers-in-arms like they’re on their way to the pitch; one holds tight a rosary and whispers a prayer to the Holy Mother. I shift my glance to the photograph: My mother, my father, my little sister, myself—all of us happy; that was two years ago when we lived in a better world.

“Oi! You!” yells one of the soldiers. “Whatcha got there?”

“Just a picture of family,” I say.

“Ooh, family. Ya one of the conscripts?” he asks.

“Yeah. Yeah, I am.”

He laughs and elbows the boy next to him. “A conscript! A yellow-necked, spineless coward couldn’t’ve found the testicular fortitude to join up to defend honour, king, and country on his own. You’ll be the first to die. The cowards always do.”

The boy’s eyes are filled with hope, longing for purpose, destiny, and pain. Who hurt him? Who wounded his ego to make him lemon-bitter? “And you’re so brave?” I ask and put the photograph back into my puttee.

“Yeah, I am. I signed up as soon as I turned 18.”

“A real man would’ve lied about his age if he wanted to defend honour, king, and country.”

The boy furrows his brow, his face turns red, and he stands up. “I oughta save the Huns the trouble and kill ya right now!” he yells and takes two steps forward. A man stands up and prevents him from coming further.

“If I were you, I’d sit down before the corporal gets word of this. You can’t defend honour, king, and country while cleaning the latrines and killing rats,” he says, and the boy huffs and sits beside his friend.

His hair is chocolate brown, and his eyes are jade green. He stands about six foot, and he is skinner than a rail—the perfect soldier to slip through barbed wire and attack the German trenches. Off his neck hangs a silverplate crucifix: nicked, scratched, and worn baby-flesh soft by devotion. He sits down just as the lorry pops up from hitting a pothole; one soldier says, “Bloody hell,” as he bites his tongue from the impact.

“Thanks for that,” I say.

“My pleasure. I don’t take kindly to bullies,” he says.

“What’s your name?” I ask.

“Henry. Henry Thorpe. You?” asked Henry.

“Kenneth Appleby,” I say.

“Kenneth. I like it. You’re Appleseed to me,” he says and smiles a little.

“Where’re you from?” I ask.

“Manchester.”

I smirk and say, “London.”

“Oh? Maybe I should’ve let that bugger get after you.”

We laugh, the lorry stops with authority, and the journey is finally done. “Fucking finally. I gotta piss,” says one boy.

“Alright, lads, enough lollygagging. Get out, take a piss, get a drink, grab your pack, and we march to the front,” says the corporal as he leaves the lorry's cab.

We file out of the bed and hop into mud that reaches my ankles. The town serves as the rotational station for troops to recover after their time in the trenches and a staging ground for fresh troops to replenish the ranks. All about are shell craters filled with brown ice, tearing apart the streets maliciously. Buildings that once stood firmly now lean, chunks missing from their sides, pulverized bricks and mortar painting the muddy streets like the souls of the lost that haunt this town. In the distance, an unmistakable, jarring thud rings out, followed by a clattering of the shell casing that casts its payload into the everlasting, hoping to reach its target in vain. Behind me are a group of soldiers pissing on the side of a ruined cathedral; part of its roof has collapsed onto the pews, and where a stained-glass masterpiece once stood is nothing more than coloured shards amongst the shattered wood; the Gothic architecture a sad vestige of its once-pristine nature, built during a time of humanity’s better angels. Jesus miraculously stands, held firm to his cross, looking on with pity and pain.

“Hey, have some respect, you bloody animals!” says the corporal as he comes over and shoos the offending soldiers desecrating the holy grounds. “Infantile pollocks, pissing about wherever they see fit to hold their pricks. That’s enough mucking about; file up, you hopeless lot!”

The company comes into line and stands at attention. “Welcome to scenic Ypres! This’ll be your home for the next three months. Down that way,” says the corporal, who points eastward, “is where your enemy hides like a wounded rabbit in his borrow. Your job is to flush the bastard out and snap his lousy neck. Before you enter the trenches, I urge you to keep your socks dry at all costs and always carry an extra pair. There’s muddy water and all sorts of filth inside those hellholes. I don’t want you coming back to town because you have a case of trench foot—that would break my fucking heart. Let’s see, what else... Oh, yes, in a few days is Christmas, so we will give extra rations of chocolate, small fruitcakes, tea, cigarettes, and gill rum, and mass will be held at the cathedral at noon—that is, if no more of you piss on it.” He glares at the offenders and turns his attention back to us. “Any questions?”

A chubby private goes to raise his hand, but before he can do anything, the corporal says, “Good, let’s get going. It’s a mile walk, but I don’t anticipate our arrival until dusk.”

And so we march. At the entrance of the trenches, the ground is somewhat frozen, but further on, the frost gives way to water, which turns the ground into muddy tar that sticks to everything. My feet have never been so cold. Madmen design the trenches—jagged switchbacks go hither and thither with no sense of direction; on the sides, nailed into the reinforcing wood boards, are signs pointing this way and that, directing where each station and position is, but it isn’t easy making a mental map. However, the corporal seems to have memorized the layout of this warren, not once consulting the signs. Behind me is Henry.

“Appleseed! Hey, Appleseed, wait up!” he says, jogging past the layabouts.

“I thought you left me,” I say.

“Nah, I couldn’t leave my buddy. It’s colder than a witch’s tit in here.”

“Yeah, I’m not sure my feet will get out of these ice cubes no matter how much I chip.”

“Maybe the rats will keep you warm at night.”

My face turns palish, and a lump forms in my throat. “Rats?” I ask.

“Yeah, rats. Big ones. They grow as big as a bulldog and just as vicious,” he said.

My eyes go wide, and I stare straight ahead.

“I heard that one poor sod had his ears nibbled off in his sleep, and another had his entire sausage carried off by a dog-rat. It was hanging from its mouth and dangling about, and he chased it, but it disappeared before he could catch it. I guess he got medical leave, and no one’s heard from him since. Poor Prickless Peter,” Henry said.

My brow goes flat, eyes half closed, and I look at Henry contemptuously. “You’re taking the piss.”

“No! I’m being serious! Ask anyone around here, and they’ll tell you about Prickless Peter and Earless Edward. Stories like that are no joking matter.”

I shake my head and sigh, and Henry stifles a giggle.

“How long have you been here?” I ask.

“I just got back from my first leave. It was nice visiting home and seeing my mum. After these shit rations, a dry roast tastes like the king’s supper. I wish it were on better terms.”

“Why?” I ask.

“A few days before I was set to sail home, I got a letter from Mum that Dad died in his sleep. They don’t know what it was, just that he seemed to have a fever and never woke up. I wish I could’ve been at his bedside during his final hours instead of sitting in a shit trench in Belgium fighting krauts for no reason than to uphold a treaty. But God works in mysterious ways. I think it was a sign from Him to toughen me up and prepare me to be the man of the house,” Henry said.

“How old are you?” I ask.

“25. You?” he says.

“19. I got lucky for a year, but fate gets its way,” I say.

Henry jogs a little ahead of me and walks backward, asking, “What’s your family like?”

“Normal, I guess? My dad’s a little weird.”

“How so?”

“He’s an electrician and has one of those hand buzzers that’re on the back of funny books. Whenever he meets a new client, he puts it on and shakes their hand. It gives them a helluva scare, but they always return when they see his work.”

Henry lets out a good laugh. “That’s amazing. Absolute mad lad.”

“Mum’s his secretary, and I’ve got a little sister who was about to start school, but with the war, I don’t think she’s going to yet.”

“What were you doing before you got called to duty?” Henry asks.

“I was studying at university, majoring in English.”

“Ah, a man of letters. A writer in training?”

I blush, avoiding his gaze, and say, “I dabble. It’s nothing great, but some people like it.”

“Favorite book. Go.”

“Uh,” I say and scratch my head. “*A Princess of Mars*.”

“Interesting, good. Never heard of it. I don’t read much,” Henry says.

“Everyone should read. It’s good for the mind, good for the soul,” I say.

“Well, I work at the ironworks—well, used to—so I don’t have time to read; I’d rather relax at the pub with me mates and drink a few pints,” he says.

“From the looks of it, you’re gonna do a lot of reading around here,” I say and look up to the orange sky of the approaching dusk.

Just as the corporal predicted, we arrive at the front as the sun goes to bed. Wires hang about—telegraph lines, the invisible messengers whose lives we depend on, and light bulbs, nothing but a dull impersonation of daylight. Sandbags tower nine feet high in the front trench, wood boards reinforce the earth, and atop these fortifications are miles of metal thickets. Ladders allow soldiers to scale the side of the defenses, but a sign hangs beside it, saying, “*DO NOT CROSS THIS RUNG!*” a warning to those precocious young lads who believe themselves invincible and have half a rat’s brain. One soldier stands on the ladder—a rung above where the sign tells him not to cross—with periscope binoculars, looking into no-man’s-land—a place of death and suffering where only the stupid and brave enter, but none return with air in their lungs: A barren landscape with dead trees scattered about and dead bodies occupying the shell craters; some are frozen—a demented icicle a reminder of the futility of battle. We are forever frozen in the cold gusts of war.

Off in the distance, a dull thud rings through the night, shaking the trench with a magnificent quake. The sentry’s eyes turn to saucers, his face turns as pale, and he yells back at us: “Incoming! Take cover!”

We fall to the ground, assuming the fetal position, using our helmets to guard our innards against shrapnel damage. The shell falls just ten yards short of the trench. Mud kicks into the air and falls, down, down, down, on the poor unfortunates in gravity’s way. A screeching, shrill ring pierces my skull—blood leaks from my ears. My head feels like a golf club mistook my forehead for a ball. The lights sway—the wood posts that they’re strung from splinter and fall over, recalling the mortal wounds of their ancestors. Wires caught in the way snap in twain and lie crackling in the mud, electrifying the wet ground. Utter chaos abounds.

Everything is as if it is fighting against an invisible tide. To my side, there is a hole in the trench wall. Splinters of wood embed the wall opposite, and bags that reinforce the fortifications lay split open, spilling their contents like the man’s guts further beyond. Soldiers run to and fro, assessing the damage from the shell’s impact and tending to the unlucky few who are wounded.

Time resumes its normal flow, and the ringing in my ears subsides before the hammering of gunshots assaults them. A private stands on the top of a ladder spared by the shell and fires his rifle into the blackness of night in pure vanity, hoping to strike luck like gold. “You rat bastards!” he says. “You’ll fuckin’ pay for this!” and continues to fire until the clip runs dry.

He reaches back into his belt to retrieve a fresh supply of ammunition, but the corporal grabs his hand. “Calm down, private!” he says. “You’re just wasting lead. They’re trying to rile us up. Don’t fall for it.”

“But they know the rules of war. They’re not supposed to shell at night,” the private says.

“There are no rules in war: only suggestions,” says the corporal.

The private’s eyes fall to the ground in shame, and he hops off the ladder. The corporal goes to the man whose insides have come outside, but all he can do is give him a shot of morphine and a lie.

The grim procedure unfolds when a realization comes, and panic overtakes me: where is Henry? I look one way, then another, when there is a tap on my shoulder. It’s Henry.

“Boy, that was one helluva welcome party,” he says.

“Where were you?” I ask.

He points to a dugout opposite the trench side where the shell obliterates the wood and sandbags. “I heard it coming and dived in there. Glad I did when I did, or I’d be that poor sod over there,” Henry says and motions toward the now-dead soldier.

“How can you be so casual about this? He was in the wrong place at the right time. What if it were you? What if it were me? What if...what if...?” The trench presses against my back and my arse meets the cold mud, my knees pulled up to my chest, forehead resting on them.

Henry squats down next to me and puts his hand on my shoulder. “You can’t ask those questions and survive here; it’s impossible. Sometimes you’re lucky. Sometimes you’re not. It’s the harsh reality. You must live in the present—not then, but here—and you deal with the adversity as it comes your way. We all die. We have an expiration date stamped on our heels. When your time comes, that’s it. You can’t do anything. But constantly asking yourself, ‘what if?’ will hurt you more than any bullet could.”

Tears wet my cheeks. I chuckle a little: “Guess I need to learn to be tough like you.”

“You will in time. That’s what experience does to a person: turns the soft fleshy bits to leather.”

He grabs my hand, helps me to my feet, and we leave for the barracks.

My dreams carry messages of death and destruction. Horrors unspeakable fill my head. Dead bodies lay around, and the impact of shells shatters my soul. Men are broken from the chaos; their minds are ripped asunder from senseless violence. They speak to the dead, begging to join them to find respite from the machinations of destruction that their minds cannot comprehend. How can we do this? How can we lead these men—these boys—to this terrifying reality? The kings sit upon their thrones, see their vast kingdoms, and hold that alliances are better to be defended than their subjects. Paper is worth more than flesh.

I awake with a start and struggle to find my breath. Pale, blearing light streams into the muddy barracks through a hole in the door, and my bones freeze. Christmas Eve. This is my first one away from home. Around the quarters, the boys are fast asleep. The previous night's misadventures are a vague memory floating around the veil of my consciousness. We fought, drank, ate, sang, made our ancestors proud. I put on my boots, then the rest of my fatigues, followed by my puttees, and stretch my frozen joints. Quietly, I tiptoe across the mud floor and leave for the latrine.

Far from the barracks is an open pit filled with shit, piss, and floating rats drowning in the waste. A single sponge on a stick hangs from a nail to clean oneself with after finishing business. The smell hits me like a brick to the face, and I swallow back the vomit accumulating in my throat. After relieving myself and stumbling about the trenches, I find the mess, and a pleasant surprise greets me.

“Appleseed,” says Henry, “I thought you’d never wake up.”

“I’m glad I did. The dreams I had,” I say.

“The first night is the worst, but you get used to it,” he says as he hands me a cup of tea.

The tin cup warms my hands. The amber-tinted drink reminds me of home, and the fragrant, dried leaves hint of noon sunshine and flowers, a reminder of hope for a better day that lies ahead. Henry adds a dash of sugar to the cup, then we cheer and sip.

“It’s Christmas Eve,” he says. “Can you believe it? It doesn’t feel like it.”

“Probably because we’re in Belgium in a dirt hole surrounded by dead bodies and barbed wire,” I say.

He chuckles. “Probably,” he says and sips his tea.

“What would you do if you were home?” I ask, then look at him while drinking.

“Go to church, first of all. Come home, help Mum prepare a roast, boil some potatoes, have a nice meal. Exchange presents. Rather dull stuff. What about you?”

The tea swirls around in the cup and circles the edge. “My parents don’t really celebrate the holidays,” I say. “Dad’s usually working, and so is Mum. My sister and I would spend the day at my grandmother’s house, but she passed away two years ago, so it’s been just the two of us. Sometimes I think they work so much to distract themselves from us.”

Henry goes quiet for a moment. “I’m so sorry, mate. That’s tough to hear. Listen, when we get out of this hellhole, you’re coming with me, and we’re celebrating Christmas proper like, okay? We may be brothers-in-arms, but we’re still brothers, and family doesn’t leave family behind. Deal?”

Tears sting my eyes, and I furiously wipe them to save face, but the damage is done. I give up and let Henry see me cry. “Deal.”

There’s shouting and coughing further down the trench. “Gas! Gas!” yells someone, and a mustard-yellow miasma streams toward us. We drop our cups and scramble to the arms locker to find gas masks, but it’s empty. Closer and closer, the cloud comes until it encircles us. My eyes burn like coals in a furnace, and tears pour from them—the gaseous acid burns inside my mouth, a bitter and hateful flavour that loves me not. My lungs fill with fluid and foam, and fighting for oxygen is a Herculean task. This is it. My time ends.

Hands on my shoulders shake me. “I’m going to find some masks,” says Henry between violent coughs, which expel red foam from his lungs. “Stay here.”

Through the burning of my eyes, he runs further into the gas, his figure engulfed by the haze that strips me of breath and sight. Then, impact and blackness.

Time is but a vague memory when I come to. A gas mask covers my face, and a massive headache assails me. On my feet, the horrors in my dreams come to life: bodies strew everywhere, limbs and chunks of flesh missing, organs intermingled with mud and wood—the debris of the debilitating attack; blood overflows the waterlogged soil, a sickly iron combined with the acrid mustard, and pools reach capacity; men cut in half at the waist wail and cry for their mothers; there is only so much morphine the medics can supply and only so many prayers they can say.

My mind flashes back to Henry running off toward danger, and I follow his trail. My eyes remain forward but still glance down at the carnage around me. All these men—sons, brothers, fathers, uncles—had their lives ahead of them. They could have been destined for great things; instead, their destinies are to be ripped to shreds by a shell. The evils of humanity are laid bare in this trench and throughout the continent.

“Where is Henry? Why can’t I find him?” I say to myself when a hand reaches out and grabs my ankle.

“Appleseed,” says a raspy voice gurgling through blood.

Henry lies in a puddle of blood, his abdomen split open like a sack of grain for the mill, his spine showing through the viscera, broken in twain, and his pelvis but pulverized bones. I rip off the gas mask and drop to my knees, grabbing his hands. They’re cold. So cold. Blood is streaming from his mouth onto his chest, coating his crucifix in his life’s essence. He coughs, gurgles, and says, “Appleseed, you’re okay.”

“Henry,” I say, “what did they do to you?”

“Rat bastards did the gas-‘n’-bomb. Cheeky fuckers. It worked.”

“I’m going to get you help,” I say.

“No. Please, don’t leave.”

“I have to get help. We can save you.”

“I don’t want help. I want to be here with my bud,” Henry says before a sigh oozes more blood from his mouth. “Remember what I told you about our expiration date?”

I wipe tears away from my eyes and say, “Yeah, I do.”

“Mine’s come. There’s no stopping it,” he says, followed by rattling coughs, which bring more bloody mucus to the fore. “Appleseed, listen to me. Whatever you do, don’t hold a grudge. They were following orders, just like us. This is war. We’re just pawns controlled by the players.” He grabs his crucifix, yanks it off his neck, and places it in my palm. “Forgiveness takes strength, and while you don’t think it, you’re the strongest person I know.”

Henry’s breathing is deep and raspy, filled with more gurgling until his final exhale stays his chest.

“Henry? Henry, wake up. Henry, stop playing around and wake up. I’m going to get help. Don’t move, okay?” I say and stagger to my feet. I search for a medic and find one. Grabbing him by the collar and yanking him to his feet, I say, “My friend. He needs help,” then point back to Henry.

“I’m sorry, kid, he’s gone,” he says, returning to work on the patient he was caring for.

“He’s just asleep. We can go wake him up.”

“He’s dead. Don’t you understand? Dead. Dead as a post. I’m not Jesus, and he’s not Lazarus.”

My fist meets the back of his head, knocking him over before pinning him to the ground and raining down punches into his face. “Save him!” I say. “You have to save him!” Blow after relentless blow breaks my knuckles, and each impact swells the man’s face like a vine of ripe tomatoes ready to be picked for the season. Two other soldiers run over and grab me from behind in a grappling hold. Flailing, I scream, “*HENRY!*”

**2**

*23 December 1914*

*Two days until Christmas. It is cold. Scheiße, it is cold. I miss my warm bed and fire. Agnes is pregnant, and Sigmund desperately tries to court her, but she refuses his advances. This has caused strife between him and Bruno. Little Sebastian is growing up quickly, and Christian is not far behind. Soon, they will find a mate, and their progeny will follow their father’s legacy. I still do not appreciate the Olaf boy killing poor Friedrich. Everyone should know by now not to leave food unattended, but humans are stupid rats.*

A fog leaves my mouth, carried by a sigh. The notebook and pencil return to their home in the sack. Through the periscopes, nothing resides in no-man’s-land except for spindly, debarked, and leafless trees that sway gently from the wind, which whips through the shell craters, around the decaying bodies of the fools who thought themselves immortal, only to be reminded of their mortality. There is a speck, however, inching towards one of the craters. My eyes narrow, and it comes into sharper focus. A little rat stands at the crater's edge, poking its head inside, and finds a morsel—one of the bulging eyeballs of a corpse occupying the crater. A small smile spreads across my face, and my tongue clicks to get its attention. It works. The creature looks up, sniffs the air, and peers in my direction. Its head explodes.

The headless body falls forward, its back legs kicking violently, unaware its head has disintegrated yet still determined to flee. The periscopes drop from my hands, and they cover my mouth. There are chuckles and snorts beside me. One soldier holds his rifle and stamps his feet while his friend buries his face into his friend's shoulder.

“*Rattengesichtiger Jude*,” says the one with the rifle.

Our eyes lock, but I say nothing and walk. No anger, no hate, just pity.

The pale sun stands overhead, and the mess calls for me. The usual is prepared for us: stew and bread. Always stew and bread. I go to the mess officer, get my provisions, and look for a spot to sit. Several people occupy most, friends made during the hellish reality of eternal conflict, but I find an empty spot near the back wall of the mess-trench. I sit down, tear off a chunk of bread, dip it into the gravy, and place it in my mouth. An avalanche of salt assaults my tongue, and I fight to swallow it. My hands fumble for my tin of water, and I take a large gulp.

Taking a bite from the stew, the two boys who killed the rat enter the mess. My palms and bottoms of my feet prickle, a cold sweat dews on my skin, and a chill runs laps on my spine. They go to the mess officer and procure their food before heading toward me. I stand up, food in hand, but one of the boys blocks my exit.

“Whoa, whoa there,” he says. “Now, where do you think you’re going, ol’ pal?”

“I just realized that I’m not hungry. If you’ll excuse me, I have sentry duty,” I say, trying to push past him, but his friend also stimies my escape.

“You look awful hungry to me. I can see the bones in your face, your hands. Jesus, you probably weigh as much as that rat in the crater.”

My face flushes; I look at the ground and knock them in the shoulders, but with no success. The boy who committed the deed grabs me and forces me to sit. He sits across from me with his buddy at his side. Without a second thought, he grabs the bread from my bowl and takes a bite. “Ew, is this challah? I think it’s challah,” he says, throwing it into the mud.

“No, challah is—,” I say.

“I don’t give a fuck what challah is or isn’t, kike.”

Biting my tongue, I stare into my stew and stir it with my spoon, my appetite leaving me.

“So, since you Jews don’t celebrate Christmas, does that mean you think Jesus wasn’t real, or how does that work?” the other boy asks.

“No, we believe Jesus was real, but we don’t believe he was the Messiah as foretold,” I say.

“Which is why you killed him, right?”

“What? No, we didn’t kill Jesus.”

“Pretty sure you did,” says the first boy, chomping on his bread between dips in the stew. “Around here, we don’t treat murderers kindly, especially when they killed our Lord and Savior.” He grabs my stew and throws the bowl beside the soiled bread in the mud. “Eat it, Jew. Fucking eat it like the rat you are.”

Our eyes lock. My hands ball into fists so tight that my nails dig into my palms and draw blood. My jaw clenches until the veins rise to the surface. “No,” I say, barely above a whisper.

“Excuse me?” the boy says.

“I said no!”

A split second later, I’m face-first in the mud, a pressure squeezing into my back, and my arms twisted at unnatural angles. A hand grabs the bread and forces it to my mouth.

“Eat, Jew! Eat, you little rat bastard!” says the voice screaming into my ear.

My mouth stays clenched, but dirty fingers pass my lips and teeth and force them open. A cascade of gritty mud enters, followed by a wet sponge of bread, filling my mouth past capacity, partly down my throat. Fighting to breathe, the air grows thinner and the mud thicker. Eventually, the assault stops, and the pressure on my back abates.

“Come on, I think he’s learned his lesson,” says one of the boys. The squelching of boots in the mud fades into the distance, and I look up. The mess is deathly quiet, all eyes staring at me. Tears well in my eyes, and I get up as quickly as possible, spitting out whatever mud and bread I can before grabbing my rucksack and retreating to safety.

The iron and wood bounces against my back, and the clanging of loose ammunition and loaded clips provide noise for the eerie silence that sweeps through the trenches. To my left, planks and sandbags. To my right, damp dirt and napping soldiers. The occasional bird chirp sneaks through, providing a lively accompaniment to the orchestra of muddy squelches and tinny clangs. I stop and look up into the sky. Steely blue and wispy clouds stand over my head like a circus tent, the sun slowly working its way further toward the horizon as the day nears its end. Down the trench is an alcove, and my pace quickens.

During the construction of the trenches further from the frontline, away from the auspices of the relief station towns, holes occurred naturally. If one was on the opposing side of the front, it was left alone. I duck inside the dark, musty, dry, and somewhat warm space. On the floor lies a bundle of hay and wood wool, and inside are three rats, curled up in balls, sleeping soundly. Gently, I reach down and pick up the one closest to me. Its eyes flutter open as it awakens from its deep sleep, its nose sniffing my thumb, trying to figure out who I am. I bring it to my chest and pet its head with two fingers. After a couple of strokes, it remembers who I am and closes its eyes.

“So, the Jew returns home,” says a voice from outside the alcove.

“What do you want?” I ask.

“Oh, nothing. Just walking, taking the air, enjoying the calm,” says the voice as it walks into the alcove. Through the darkness, a face comes into focus: the boy from earlier, the bane of my existence; unhappy breath fills my lungs.

“Leave me alone. I haven’t done anything to you,” I say. “I’m staying away from everybody. I’m not hurting anyone. Please, leave me be.”

“But you are hurting people, hurting them by existing. Your kind are a mistake, a cancer, a plague, and you should all be exterminated like your precious rats,” he says and grabs the one I hold in my arms.

“Give him back!” I say.

“I don’t think I will.” He holds the rat upside-down by its tale, and it flails around, squeaking in pain and fright. “No matter what we do, you keep coming back. You keep multiplying. Even though the world is better without you, you Jews don’t give up. You are like vermin: you bring disease, unrest, and bad omens wherever you see fit to call your home. Frankly, I’m tired of playing nice. If I could, I’d round up every single one of you and put a bullet right here,” he says, pointing to the rat’s head. It swings forward and bites his finger. “Motherfucker!”

He shakes the rat loose from his finger, and a stream of blood leaks from the wound, each drop falling into the dirt. The rat panics and runs around, trying to find an escape until the heel of the boy’s boot comes down and crushes its skull. He lifts his boot and stomps again. And again. And again. Blood, gore, and viscera fly with each impact, coating both his boot and me.

“If I see you around one more time, that’ll be you. You understand?” he says.

The corpse of the rat lies still in the blood-moistened dirt. The words enter my ears, but their meaning is lost.

“Do you understand?” he yells.

“I understand,” I say.

“Good.” He stomps the rat once more before turning around and walking away. “Happy fucking Hannukah.”

My hands scoop up the crushed, obliterated body of the rat—blood, gore, and all.

“I'm so sorry,” I say.

A dull thud rings out in the distance.

*24 December 1914*

*Christmas Eve. Morale is high this morning. Liquor flows freely, livening even the dullest spirits. They broke into one of the marshal’s quarters when he was asleep and absconded the whiskey bottle. It’s nearly empty now. My heart yearns for home. I want to spend Hanukkah with my family, not surrounded by men who hate me for existing. Enemies surround me from both sides: across the trenches and within them. I wish there were some way to sway their opinion, but a solution seems far at hand. Regardless, I must push on. I must be stronger than them.*

The jovial laughs are interrupted by yelling and cursing. Around the corner, a group of soldiers passes around the bottle of whiskey with the marshal screaming at them. He grabs the bottle from one of them and says, “I ought to PT all of you for subordination and disobeying orders. Who do you think we are, the English? The French? Rules are put in place for a reason, to keep *Arschlöcher* like you in line and to prove we are the premier fighting force in the world. Do this again, and see what happens. Understood?”

“*Ja, Feldmarschall!*” they say and salute.

The marshal leaves them and walks down the trench. I press myself against the wood as hard as possible, but he still sees me and says, “Ah, Adolf. Just the man I was looking for. Come, I need you.”

As we pass other soldiers, they drop what they’re doing and salute the marshal. He says, “Today is an excellent moment in this war, a day to be remembered throughout history. I believe this plan may turn the momentum in our favor and end this disastrous conflict in only two months. Alas, it is not my own plan, but its brilliance speaks of my own, so I take credit for it.”

“What is it, *Herr Feldmarschall*?” I ask.

“I’m glad you asked. We combine two attacks into one: gas to encircle the enemy and shells in the middle. It’ll be the world’s finest turkey shoot.”

“When do you plan to unleash it?”

“In a quarter-hour.”

I stop. “But, *Herr Feldmarschall*, it’s Christmas Eve. You shouldn’t attack; it’s bad faith.”

He turns around and looks at me. “That’s why I won’t be attacking. A Jew will be attacking.”

“I won’t do it,” I say.

“I beg your pardon?” he asks.

“I said I won’t do it.”

He comes to me, and our faces are but inches apart. “You will do it, Jew. You will do it because bad faith is in your blood. Refuse my orders, and I have no qualms about throwing you into a cramped cell unfit for a rat.”

Silence fills the air, and the marshal smiles. “Good. I’m glad you see it my way.”

The arms depot contains a mortar launcher and many gas grenades taken to the frontline. The supports are pressed tightly into the mud to stabilize the device from the shock of the mortar as it leaves. The sight on the launcher is zeroed in on its target, the English trench not but half a mile away across the field of death. I grab a gas mortar and place it in the launcher's barrel, but my hands refuse to drop it.

“Come on,” says a fellow soldier. “Do it.”

His voice falls upon deaf ears, and the launcher stares at me mockingly. The mortar is taken from my hand, placed into the barrel, then dropped—the charge detonates—and flies into the sky, up and up, until the blue infinity swallows it. My ears ring as another drops, then another, and another.

**3**

The crimson-stained crucifix rests in the palm of my hand, the weight of it greater than expected—sunlight glimmers off the silver, a spectacular light show dim in the aftermath of tragedy. My fingers close around it and place it in my pocket. The priest's voice at his pulpit comes back into focus, and the paragon of faith and virtue glows brilliantly as the morning sun stands above his head, a slight halo emerging.

“When we speak of the Lord’s Prayer,” he says, “we often do not think of its meaning. It’s a ubiquitous prayer that many of us can speak in our sleep, but there is much meaning behind its words. It’s not simply a prayer to honour our Father but a contract we enter into which we promise to uphold His tenants and treat everyone how He treats us: with love and forgiveness.

“The story of Jesus’ birth has become intertwined with the giving of gifts, and often we say that gift-giving is the central focus of Christmas. However, when the time for those gifts comes, we have a conundrum: what do we give and to whom? Do we give frankincense, Muhr, and gold like the Wisemen did in the Scripture? Or do we offer something more practical, like a toy for a boy or jewelry for our spouse? Furthermore, who ‘deserves’ these gifts the most? That’s the most challenging question. It’s easy to begin by giving gifts to those you love, but have you ever thought about giving gifts to those you dislike or even hate?”

Everyone looks confused by this, but the Father continues, “Yes, you should give gifts even to those you despise. Near the end of the Lord’s Prayer, we ask God to ‘forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.’ It seems relatively straightforward: someone mistreats us, we tell them all is well, and we go on our way. But forgiving someone who slights against you is the hardest thing to do; it goes against human nature. When we forgive someone, we admit that we were wronged in some way, but we accept the loss and swallow our pride—one of the deadliest sins. To be a true Christian—a faithful Catholic—we must give up our innate human nature and follow in the footsteps of our Savior, Christ Jesus. For this Christmas, I ask that all in the congregation give the gift of forgiveness, even to your most hated enemy. Let us pray.”

We all stand, and the Father leads us in the Lord’s Prayer.

Standing outside the congregation, near the outermost pews, Henry’s friends speak in hushed voices. They see me and end their conversation. One says, “Kenneth. Do you feel better after Mass?”

“Marginally,” I say. “I know Henry would’ve liked to be here.”

“He was—in spirit,” he says.

A heaviness weighs in my chest, and my heart constricts. My eyes sting as the tears flow freely with no hesitation. The three of them come over and embrace me in a tight hug. Even with this company, the loneliness is crippling. A hole the size of a shell crater replaces my heart, one so big and deep that it can never hope to be filled, so raw that the air itself feels like a burning knife slicing me.

“We were talking,” says one of three, “and we decided that we’re all going to lay down our arms and meet up with the Germans in the middle of no-man’s-land.”

“Can we do that?” I ask.

He shrugs. “Probably not, but it is Christmas, after all, so they should be okay with it.”

“I’m not sure,” I say. “I don’t want to get in trouble. I’ve only been here a few days and don’t need to be labeled a troublemaker. My life here is hell enough as it is.”

“Come on. It’ll be fun. We can play football. I know I’ve wanted to play since I got here, and I wanna see if those krauts are as good as jolly ol’ England.”

“Fine, I’ll come with you. But I'm coming after you if I get thrown in the brig,” I say.

He smiles and throws an arm around my shoulders. “Atta boy.”

We leave the makeshift church behind and look for a gap in the barbed wire to give us safe passage into the cold desert of death. Further down the trenches, away from the front that runs parallel to Ypres, there’s a small gap—about a yard wide—between the thickets. With no ladder, we clamber up the wooden wall one by one, the first helping the next. About a dozen and a half of us take our first steps into the fated land of legend, where men enter and none leave: no-man’s-land.

Flat, dead, pitted earth stretches before us, and impact craters from shells that fell short paint the field to look more like the Moon than earth. Inside each pit, stagnant water releases a pungent odour of sickly decaying flesh, turned black from the onslaught of bacterium and mould. Body parts betrayed by their masters bob in the craters whose water is still liquid and stick upward in the ones that’ve frozen over. The flesh recedes from where a limb was torn away from the greater whole, turning a deathly black and vibrant green; the fingernails slowly grow longer and longer as time passes until they wrest loose from their beds and fall into the stewpot. Heads, which have departed their bodies, stare into the sky aimlessly, their faces asking, “Why did this happen to me?” but they are unafforded a satisfactory answer, left to question their fate for the rest of eternity while their bitter souls wander their graves, longing to return home.

The gentle winter breeze tickles the inside of my nose, and the bitter air chills the back of my throat. A freshness overtakes me—a renewal of spirit—as my eyes glance hither and thither. Not a cloud is in sight. The frigid cold freezes the water suspended in the air and forms a corona around the sun, giving it a halo on the holiest day.

“Are you done lollygagging?” asks one of the blokes who joined us.

“Huh? Yeah, just enjoying the view.”

“What view?” he asks and cocks his head to the side.

I blush a little as he leaves me. My hand travels into my pocket and wraps around the crucifix laying within. I pull it out, unhook the chain, and place it around my neck. Looking down, the crimson pain covers Jesus’ upper torso. With my thumb, I vigorously scrub away the blood, but all for naught: it remains, with a couple of scratches now included.

My comrades walk ahead of me, some passing a football back and forth, some chatting away—the dull murmurs and laughs a missed sound replacing the cacophony of gunpowder and clattering shell casings. My mind returns to yesterday. Evil people exist throughout this world—people who cause immense suffering and ruin (or take) the lives of others. When God made man, He gave us all free will, but do those who serve under evil still possess free will or do they sacrifice it when they follow orders? A man who obeys what he is told is no better than a trained animal. When they attacked, there surely must’ve been someone who spoke against it. My face flushes a bright red, and I grip the crucifix around my neck tightly, squeezing the life from Jesus. No one with a modicum of sense would have thought to strike on the eve of Christmas like a soulless coward. Henry didn’t deserve to die as he did. But they attacked; they attacked anyway. My teeth grit until they’re about to shatter like porcelain. They obeyed like dogs waiting for a bone. I'll treat them like dogs if they wish to act like it.

I reach back on my belt and finger the knife’s handle.

*25 December 1914*

*Christmas. Instead of sausage and eggs, the soldiers’ breakfasts are shots of spirits. The liquor flows more freely than the water, more than yesterday. While the marshals aren’t too fond of the drunkenness and rowdy behavior, they tolerate it somewhat, considering the occasion. Everyone is celebrating like it’s the last Christmas they’ll ever see, and for some, that may be the case.*

My teeth sink deeply into the greasy, fried sausage, and the skin explodes inside my mouth, letting free the ground pork cured in sea salt—a less-than-kosher dish. A dash of coffee washes it back, and my attention returns to reading. One hand holds open the miniature copy of the Torah while the other ferries the food into my mouth steadily. The mess-trench is empty, save for me—even the mess officer left to join in the festivities—as the boys galivant around with their liquor and celebrations. I understand giving gifts—it was four smart gentlemen who gave gifts to the baby Jesus—but the excess of alcohol, I don’t. I suppose it’s a cultural thing. My people and their people will never coexist peacefully, though I pray we can eventually. I hold no ill feelings toward these boys. They’re ignorant, and they’ve been raised to believe cruel and ridiculous things about Jews, but maybe in time, they will learn that no matter how far apart we seem, we are closer in actuality.

A squelching of boots in thick mud breaks the silence within the mess. My back is to the entrance of the mess, assuming no one would enter while the company drinks themselves blind. My throat goes dry, forcing myself to swallow the food to prevent choking with fear. Over my shoulder, the boy who tortured me two days previous sways from side to side, using the tables to stand upright. A bottle of rotgut vodka in his hand, quarter-filled sloshes about; he puts it to his lips, takes a drink, and wipes his mouth. “Ay, Adolf, my boy! How’re you doing?” he says.

Clearing my throat, I say, “Uh, I’m doing well, I supposed. Well enough, I’d say. How are you? You’re awful, uh, unbalanced.”

“Yeah, well, can’t spend a Christmas sober, especially not in this Hell,” he says, taking another swig before sitting beside me. With the hand holding the bottle, he puts his arm around my shoulders and pulls me against his side. The smell of his damp, unwashed uniform, sweat-filled and hinting of urine, is overcome by an overbearing cloud of distilled spirits. My eyes water up.

“What’s wrong? Why are you crying?” he says with an uncouth slur.

“Uh, I’m just—I’m just touched that you’d come to spend time with a lowly Jew instead of drinking with your friends,” I say.

“Ha! ‘Lowly Jew.’ You’re not too bad a guy, Adolf; you know that? As far as Jews go, you’re pretty all right in my book. I mean, sure, Jews cause plague, social unrest, war, famine, debt, and a whole bunch of other things, but you? You’re the least Jewish Jew I’ve ever known.”

“That’s a good thing, right?”

“What do you mean, ‘Is that a good thing?’” he says as he narrows his eyes. “That’s a great thing!”

A small sigh of relief escapes my lips as he takes another swig of the vodka.

“Well, I better be off. We’re gonna go into no-man’s-land and play football later if you want to come. I don’t know if your kind plays football, but you should give it a chance, it’s fun. Oh, and here’s mud in your eye,” he says, then pours a steady stream of vodka into my coffee. “*Hey, diddle-diddle, the cat and the fiddle. The cow jumped over the moon.*”

He stumbles and fumbles, nearly losing his balance before catching himself at the last second. I look at the cup of coffee on the table and dump it onto the ground.

Finishing my breakfast, the ruckus leads me to my brothers-in-arms, taking down a portion of the barbed wire with a pair of hand shears. The wires are cut and disposed of one by one, and the next boy comes along to help. Eventually, a hole is made wide enough to allow one to pass through. Each soldier clambers up the wood paneling to the top of the trench and exits through the hole in the wire. When they’ve all left, my turn comes. The wall is an easy obstacle to negotiate, and a wonderous sight greets my success.

A mass of humanity slowly converges halfway between the trenches throughout the barren hellscape of no-man's-land. Two sides in bitter conflict, for one day, put aside their differences and allegiance to country to recognize that they are brothers of the single human race. English boys and German men embrace one another; some play football, and others give gifts of cigarettes and liquor. Dead ahead of me, coming in my direction, is an English boy with his hands behind his back.

On the day of the birth of the Son, two warring tribes see their enemies not as that but as their brothers, misguided by the words and deeds of those who rule. Comradery abounds, the hatchet is buried as gifts of goodwill are passed, and sport mends the wounds of conflict. Two souls of different faiths and upbringings see their mirror across the loveless wastes. Their eyes meet, and they close the distance between themselves.

“*Guten Morgen* and merry Christmas,” says the German boy, Adolf.

“Merry Christmas yourself,” says the Englishman, Kenneth.

“I hope I haven’t bothered you, and I’m sorry if I did,” says Adolf.

Kenneth remains silent, avoiding eye contact.

“I don’t know whom to give this to, so I figure you’d enjoy it more than I. I’m not a fan of fruitcake,” says Adolf, pulling a small bundle out of his rucksack wrapped in cloth and string. He unties one of the strings and opens the package, revealing a freshly baked fruitcake whose aroma of rum, sweetly dried fruits, and roasted nuts fills the air between them. “If you have nothing to give me, I don’t mind. I’m not a big fan of Christmas.”

Kenneth looks up at Adolf curiously, an eyebrow raised, and asks, “Why? Christmas is the best holiday.”

“Well, uh, us Jews don’t celebrate Christmas. It’s not our thing,” says Adolf.

Kenneth slowly nods at the boy, and Adolf clears his throat.

“Do you want to go play football? I’ve never played, but it looks fun, and I couldn’t think of a more beautiful day to do it,” says Adolf.

“No, I’d rather we stay here and talk,” says Kenneth, whose hand wraps around the handle of the knife sheathed on the back of his belt. He grabs it and pulls it out. The edge glitters in the steely blue morning sunlight, a whetstone the last to kiss the blade.

Adolf drops the fruitcake and raises his hands. “Hey, come on, there’s no reason to do this. It’s Christmas,” he says.

“I thought Jews didn’t celebrate Christmas,” says Kenneth. The venomous words stab as deeply as the knife could ever hope for. He inches closer to Adolf, who, in turn, backs away.

“We don’t, but you do. You’re Catholic, aren’t you?” asks Adolf.

The bloodstained crucifix, worn down by devotion and grief, sways gently on the blue and brown, tarnished chain. The Son watches Adolf come closer into view as Kenneth narrows the gap. “What’s that got to do with anything?” asks Kenneth.

“Everything,” says Adolf. “I’m not well-versed in Christianity, but I know Jesus preached about love and forgiveness, especially towards your fellow man. I never wanted to be here. I was drafted against my will. I wanted to stay home and live as everyone deserves, but the Kaiser said my duty required me to come to Belgium to fight an enemy I had no qualms about. I’m not your enemy, nor do I want to be. I’m a pawn, like you.”

“Yeah, you are a pawn,” says Kenneth, “but you still follow orders. God gave us free will; with that agency, we have duties to uphold. You attacked us on Christmas Eve of all days. I lost a friend—a brother—during the gas attack. This crucifix was his. This is the only thing I have to remind me of him. It could’ve been the day before or Boxing Day, but no, it had to be Christmas Eve. I don’t want your damn fruitcake. You already gave me my present, and I’m going to give you yours.”

Kenneth lunges forward with the knife outright, eyes wide, filled with a predatory instinct to kill Adolf. Adolf takes a step back, but his foot finds no solid ground. Instead, the slippery edge of a shell crater takes him. He falls backward, rolling to a stop, looking upward at Kenneth, who closes the distance. Kenneth jumps in the air, knife above his head, slicing the air in a downward arc aimed directly at Adolf’s heart. He grabs Kenneth’s wrist and twists it to the side. Kenneth cries out in pain as the bones move unnaturally, but the grip on the handle remains.

“I don’t want to hurt you,” says Adolf. “Please, stop this. This won’t bring your friend back.”

“I don’t care!” says Kenneth. “Knowing one German is gone will help me sleep easier tonight.”

The knife inches closer and closer until the point touches Adolf’s fatigues. The threads break and expose his skin, and the cold knife freezes the point of contact before a small drop of blood is set forth. Streams of vapor come from the wound, and Adolf winces.

“Your friend wouldn’t want this,” says Adolf.

The pressure from the knife recedes momentarily.

“That crucifix?” says Adolf. “I can tell your friend was devoted to his faith. He cared a lot about you to give it to you. But deep down, you know that killing me won’t do you any favors. Christmas is about what made Jesus so unique, and one thing that he did, which was so special, is forgiving those who wronged him. I know what hate is like and how it can ruin you.

“My father was assaulted and killed one morning as he was opening for the day. A group of thugs smashed the front window of his shop and stabbed him to death with the glass shards, yelling, ‘*Stirb, Jude!*’ They weren’t persecuted because my father was a Jew. I hated them with every fiber of my being. I thought my hate for them showed my father how much I loved him, but it festered within me. I couldn’t sleep for days, wracked with guilt and hate. I couldn’t take it anymore and asked my rabbi for help, to which he said, ‘Forgiveness. You must learn forgiveness.’ It was the hardest thing I ever had to do—harder than attending my father’s funeral—but I overcame my hate and learned to forgive his murderers because that’s what my father wanted. That is what your friend wants.”

The hand which holds the knife trembles like an autumn leaf set to bid farewell from its tree. The grip loosens, and it falls out, rolling to the side into the mud of the crater. Kenneth places his hands against his face, and the sobs choke him. Adolf sits upright and wraps his arms around the wounded boy, patting his back.

“Everything will be okay. I promise,” says Adolf.

The torrent of emotion let loose steadies until it is a small stream of grief. Kenneth stands and helps Adolf—both covered in mud and cold. Nearby, two teams of players, Germans versus Englishmen, have at a football game. The ball passes from foot to foot, and they trade friendly barbs back and forth. Smiles are found within the desolation of war, and so too is fraternity with those sworn as enemies. Kenneth and Adolf look at the game from afar, and Kenneth counts each player on both teams only to find that both sides are short by one.

“Remember how you said you’ve never played football?” asks Kenneth.

“Yeah,” says Adolf.

“Now’s your time to shine.”

Two mortal enemies hellbent on the destruction of each other leave the shell crater and run to the game in progress, but not before Adolf snatches the fruitcake to take back home to his rats.