

Warbird

By A.D. Cuthbert

The explosion shook the earth and made a thunderous lion roar. I threw myself to the ground and sank into the warm mud of the trench, its filthy puddles felt more and more like home each day. My ears were ringing like a thousand discordant choirs, and I could hear my friends roaring and their guns firing. Two pairs of rough hands pulled me up and onto my feet, "Come on Jock!" one of them yelled.

"My name's Ben!" I protested, but it was too late, Sammy was already up the ladder and screaming something about krauts and Alan pat me firmly on the back with a broad, northern grin "Oi! Oi! Sweaty!" he cheered and clambered after Sammy. It's a game to them, an adventure. I pulled myself onto the ladder and suddenly there was the unmistakable crack of rifle fire, followed by the unmistakable -dunk- of Alan falling backwards into the trench and hitting the muddy ground. I stared at him till I saw the life leave his eyes and the warm glow of death washed over me. I could still hear the cacophony of battle above me as I trembled up the ladder. I poked my tin coated head over the crust of the trench and saw...

I am standing behind the soldiers, two of my sisters are on either side of me. We are watching, and waiting for the worthy to fall into our arms to be taken to their rest. Five of my sisters are at the other side of the field, doing the same for the others. We are not here to pick a side, but to reward as we see fit. To us these boys are mere blurs but when they become solid we catch them and save them from...

Hell.

German and British screams mingled together into an indistinct wail, the sound of rifles tearing through flesh made no distinction on national identity. The cries of boys having their life stolen from them sounded exactly the same if they were homesick for Dresden or Kirkcaldy. English and Bavarian blood soaked into the torn earth, and was just as red as each other. No man's land was littered by barbed wire like deadly snow, and there were Saxons on either side.

A shell punched the ground and I threw myself off the ladder and back into the trench. "I'm a fool!" I muttered "A damn, damn, short sighted fool!" I kicked the wall of the trench in frustration, and slumped back into the dirt and began to cry. I never should have come here. I was always against this bloody war. I objected and was spat on. But it was worth it, I never wanted to take a life but my brother...my poor baby brother Owen, who was much more courageous and a much better man than I enlisted right away. When his letters stopped coming I knew I had to come here, to France, to find him. I thought the people who enlisted without question were the real cowards too afraid to think about their actions. But here I am, the good man too afraid to take action while everyone else dies around me. My pacifism is crumbling to dust around me, and I am not staying true to my convictions, I'm whimpering in the dirt.

Oh my poor warrior poet. How handsome he could be. I can see into his heart, it beats for his brothers both by blood and by battle. His spirit is willing but his flesh is weak and I struggle to see him now.

Another shell erupted into the scarred landscape like a backwards volcano, and I could feel my brain batter against my skull, and my insides curdle. I can feel my ears ringing and the noise of the war is muffled like I'm standing under a waterfall of carnage. I began making deep, deliberate breaths just so that I could feel in control of their sound. Like a bat guiding itself through sound, I centred myself and climbed back up the ladder to see what was happening above. With my binoculars in hand I peered out over the edge and saw...

Desolation.

Bodies were strewn in every direction, the land was pockmarked with shell craters, some of the boys were still running in every which direction and I could barely hear the commotion around me. I could see men on their knees cursing the heavens and holding their fallen fellows to their chests. I could see boys with their limbs torn asunder trying to drag themselves back to the relative safety of their side's trench. The men that still stood had discarded their weapons and were doing everything they could to get their comrades to medical attention. Some had broken arms and were dragging their friends back one laboured step at a time, others were able bodied and hoisted the wounded onto their shoulders like cargo. These men were heroes. They seemed to flit between the mines, the gunfire, and the craters, it was breathtaking to behold and as I gazed across the battlefield looking for more signs of heroism and courage...I saw him.

The boy was in a torn German uniform, blood and tears and mud caked his face and he was tangled in the barbed wire. He couldn't have been older than Owen, he was sixteen if he was a day. I could feel my stomach drop and my blood rush from my cheeks. "He's just a boy" I muttered, and began to cry "he's just a boy".

Before I knew what I was doing I was running unarmed across the field. The rumble of war continued around me, and I felt the aftershock of a shell just metres from where I was. When I reached the sobbing German lad I dropped to my knees and cupped his head in my hands "It's okay son, it's okay. I'm here now, we'll get you out of here and to a doctor". The boy looked at me in fear and confusion. It was clear he didn't understand a word I had said, so I took my water canteen, dampened my sleeve and washed his face.

My warrior poet is shining like a thousand suns. My sisters tried to call me back, they're struggling with the wardead but this brave soul is drawing me in. His compassion is his sword, and I long to be his shield.

"I wont hurt you" I said and as dug around in my shirt for Owen's crucifix and showed it to the boy "In Christ's name I'll help you son".

"Christus..." muttered the boy.

I carefully cut through the barbed wire around the boys arm and leg and leaned him against a post. "Okay" I said "I don't have the right tools to get the barbs out of your wound...so I'm going to give you some water and then I'll carry you back to the trench, and a medic will clean you up okay? Okay Son?" I shook him to keep him awake "It's what my brother would do!"

"Bruder..." smiled the boy as he closed his eyes. I tried in vain to shake him back to consciousness, but it was too late the warm glow of death washed over me. He was gone. I

fell into him and began sobbing uncontrollably, I clutched his hair and kissed him on the forehead “I’m sorry Owen, I’m so, so sorry”.

Being so focused on the boy, and with my ears ringing like the choir of the damned, I never noticed the stray grenade that had landed next to us.

Until I heard it explode.

I can see my body in the distance as I am thrown backwards and land in the soft, comfortable arms of a woman in dull armour. She has crystal clear eyes, snow white hair and stunning amber wings. She kisses me sweetly on the mouth and smiles.

“Rest now, my warrior poet. You have earned your rest”.

A warm sensation fills my entire body and I close my eyes and dream of Owen.