

# Deaths after Battle

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You lift your head. Your vision is blurry from when your nose slammed into the ground. You haul yourself up to sitting. It feels important not to stay down. That would be giving in. You can hear their footsteps growing distant beyond the closed door. They've taken the handcuffs off and you rub your wrists, feeling the red rawness through your shock.

The room is large. Longer than a cricket pitch, with a high dark ceiling. A single naked bulb struggles to push back the gloom. There's only one door. You heard them lock it on the way out. You see a wooden ladder built into the wall, leading up to a narrow wooden walkway. The light comes through its slats, making bars against the wall. That's when you notice him.

His hands are chained above his head and he swings forward on them. His feet are chained together too. The cold grey metal looks odd against his boyish pyjamas; purple satin with a turtle print. He's too old for them, you think. Seventeen perhaps. Your age.

He's grinning at you. So what? Some sort of lunatic?

'You're a very good actor,' he says. His voice is high and eager.

"Actor? What do you mean?" You ask, feigning a puzzled face.

"Ha. You think I do not know? You are definitely not over 18. Your muscles have yet to develop and your eyes give everything away – so young, so bold, so stupid. Why did you enlist in the first place?"

Instinctively, you glance down, cheeks burning. You remember the suspicious eyes of the Sergeant in charge of enlistment, who reluctantly accepted your forged birth certificate.

You also remember the hesitant eyes of your friend, Bruce who also enlisted with you. Who joined because you called him a coward. Who joined to save his name – only to lose his life...

You look away from the ground, clutching your temples as a migraine begins to pound your head.

The boy gives a shrill giggle, metal chains ominously clanging together with harsh metallic resonance. The barred windows paint grey stripes over his purple pyjamas. Your headache worsens.

“I used to be like you, so excited about a war in the front,” he replies, with a suppressed chuckle, “Wanted to fend off enemies using accurate shots with my rifle, take down machine gunners, charge down the battlefield with my bayonet.”

“Not everything is though it seems. Life is so short, so weak and fragile. Every one of them was mown down. Wave by wave they climbed the trenches, machine guns rattled, and similarly, waves and waves of bodies fell. Half of my regiment and many of my friends were taken down by Maxim bullets – while mortar fire blew hell into the sky. Whenever you tripped, or jumped for cover, you would always land on the warm flesh of a comrade who had recently died.”

A gentle breeze flutters in, swirling the dust into amorphous shapes. Forming images of dead bodies on the ground.

“When I was repositioned to Ypres, I attacked the enemy with more vigour than before. I would shower any enemy movement in the opposite trench, aggressively hurl grenades. I would stab enemies as they dared to approach the trench. Problem was, none of my comrades could recognise the feats I did, or the enemies I killed.

Those fools whom they call army corporals took me away. Psychological casualty of war they said. Since they couldn't send me back home, they locked me in this miserable cellar for the rest of my life. In chains. What sort of people would do that?”

He chuckles ominously and lifts his bloodshot eyes towards your direction. “How about you, my quiet friend? What sad story do you also have to share with all three of us?”

You stay silent.

You watch his insane eyes flicker to and fro, eyes resting on each imaginary person.

The army pushes you until you are insane, or dead.

The unfairness of it all.

You close your eyes. You try to forget the cries of friends as they charge towards the machine gun. You try to forget their almost formless, bullet-ridden shapes as they hit the ground. Worst of all you see Bruce's dead, accusing eyes as you drop your rifle and run. You have fled from their bodies, but his blank stare haunts you forever.

The door squeals with protest as it opens. A Sergeant and an assisting Private step out. They grab your wrists and hand-cuffs them, and escort you down the hallway, meandering towards the shining doorway of light.

Outside. Sunlight.

You shiver.

You walk down the grass fields to the area behind the compound. A pitted post, with rope on its side, awaits you solemnly. A squad of soldiers stand by showing no emotion. A Commanding Officer stands near the post, impatiently shuffling his feet, giving quick glances at papers. Crows spiral the air lazily sensing the coming death.

The harsh rhythms of marching footsteps stop abruptly by the post. You turn to face the ruddy Commanding Officer. He straightens the papers, his hands smooth and clean, having never held a rifle. He clears his throat, and declares:

“You have been tried and found guilty of desertion – endangering the lives of many fellow soldiers. By this, you have broken the oath of allegiance sworn to the Queen. You have been sentenced to execution by a five-man firing squad.”

Darkness envelops your eyes as they blindfold your head, unceremoniously, with one of their over-used handkerchiefs. Safety catches are removed with a metallic clink. Rifles click in unison as bullets are loaded –fingers curl forward and remain poised on the trigger, ready to unleash their fatal barrage.

However, inside your head, you hear something much louder than the rifles being loaded. Much louder than the chorus of circling crows.

The cries of your falling friends and Bruce's cold, betrayed stare.