

## **See you on the other side**

The Sun rises once again. Just how long has it been since the start of the war? Must have been months, maybe even a whole year has passed at this point- the untreated wound on my arm has almost fully healed by now. Has winter begun yet? I certainly cannot say I've been keeping track of time, but it's not too difficult to notice that the nights are becoming longer and colder. Deadlier. Making me wonder just how much more my body can withstand.

'Huh? What's happening?' A man next to me breaks my train of thought with his shouting, addressing the question to a very tall soldier standing only a few feet away from us. I can hear what made him ask – there's voices in the distance. More than usual, for that matter. The towering man turns around to face us with a puzzled expression. He seems... Relieved? With a grin, he gestures for us to follow his lead and we all make our way forward, cautious of what might be waiting for us once we reach the source of all the noise. We arrive and gaze upon a man, most likely a noble one, judging by his attire, waving something in the air as dozens of nearby British soldiers cheer for him. I squint my eyes, trying to make out the object. A white handkerchief. We won.

We count how many people we lost in the fight, treat every injury we can with the available equipment and settle down on a nearby hill with some food and beverages brought to us by the kind townspeople.

'Is this really the end?' Asks a young man, one that is presumably too young to be a legitimate soldier, but he receives no response. A sense of dread fills the air, we all know the answer.

'This fight isn't for people like us to win, kid,' the man I met not so long ago replies after a moment of silence, 'Only for us to fight. To fight over the land and wealth that we'll never have the chance to get a hold of within our lives.'

‘Why so bitter, Ohene?’ the tall soldier follows up with questions of his own, a bottle of whiskey in hand, ‘The war is over anyway, buddy. Isn’t it a time to celebrate?’

A few beverages later, the mood improves as we all get to know each other a little more – something we didn’t quite get the chance to do before. Some soldiers begin to sing a song, its melody so familiar. Where have I heard it before? I recall all the songs my mom has sung to me, however I can’t seem find the source of that comforting familiarity.

‘Where’s this song from?’ I ask, poking Ohene, ‘I think I’ve heard it before, but I can’t quite place it.’

‘Ah – Jude, is it?’ he wonders before answering my question.

‘Jules,’ I correct him immediately.

‘Right, Jules,’ he smiles, his voice suddenly dropping to a whisper as if he’s telling me a secret, ‘One of the soldiers from the French army sang it when I was on night watch once – a catchy tune, really, not hard to memorize. Just, don’t tell others I taught them a song from our enemy, got it? They probably wouldn’t like that.’ I nod as a response.

‘What did the soldier look like?’ I continue. However, even with a clue, my mind is just as hazy as before and even more questions start to pop up in my head. The days when I often struggled to survive numbed my senses, made me question even the most essential pieces of knowledge I have.

‘Black hair, small figure,’ he lists off, ‘I didn’t get to see his face in the dark, though. You might want to ask Winston over there, he knows everyone.’

He gestures at the tall, muscular, and quite intimidating man from before. As if saying ‘Please don’t hurt me, I come in peace.’, I carefully make my way through the grass towards him. Winston watches at me stagger closer and sit on

the ground next to him, unfazed by the whole ordeal. I try to gain the courage to speak up, but before I manage to get some words out, he begins to talk.

‘John, is it?’ he asks, taking a sip of some brownish and looking me up and down.

‘Jules,’ I stutter, mortified. I realize my anxiety is mostly irrational, but I can’t seem to get rid of my fear of him. This man, six feet and eight inches tall at the very least, is staring at me like I’m some sort of an easily killed insect.

‘This guy over here would like to know who that very short, dark-haired Frenchman was,’ Ohene comes to the rescue, presumably after watching me struggle to form a coherent sentence in Winston’s frankly terrifying presence.

‘You’re very shy for a man that has just come straight out of a war,’ he chuckles, scooting a little closer to me and spilling a fair amount of alcohol on my shirt, ‘His name is Théo, I’m sure. He was the only French soldier who dared to talk to me. Amusing fellow, to say the least. I told him he ought to keep his distance from us, but he never did – makes you wonder if he was just brave and naïve, or if he simply didn’t value his life enough.’

Théo? My mind goes blank – I can’t believe my memory is already fading at the ripe age of twenty. I focus harder than ever before when suddenly, I remember.

‘Hey, I’m Théo,’ a young soldier approaches me fearlessly, the soft moon rays illuminating his face. He sits on the grass next to me without any further words, just looking around for about a minute.

‘You’re not... One of us, are you?’ I break the silence eventually, with a bit of a foolish question. Obviously, he’s with the French, judging by his clothes and thick accent alone.

‘Is that not apparent enough?’ he laughs, completely unaware of the strange situation he’s created.

‘Correct me if I happen to be wrong,’ I whisper, trying to recollect my thoughts, ‘But, aren’t we enemies? Fighting each other?’

‘That doesn’t mean I have no right to socialize.’

‘No, that is exactly what it means,’ I scratch my head, trying to comprehend this man’s logic. Is he really this naïve? Even I, a complete novice to everything war related, have more common sense than he does.

‘Hey, listen, Théo,’ I smile at him warmly, putting my arm around his shoulder after making sure no one else is nearby, ‘You’re going to get killed if you do these kinds of things around here.’ He doesn’t respond, just stares at me with a blank expression. This man... is really getting on my nerves. He definitely is lucky that even as a soldier, I don’t kill unprompted.

‘You know, people here are ruthless, the war is not a game. You just haven’t seen the ugliest parts of it yet,’ I continue trying to explain, as if I’m talking to a child.

Théo smiles, leaning against my arm, ‘Well, that’s an easy thing to assume.’

Maybe because it’s easy to confide in a stranger, we begin to open up to each other. What else can we do? If we were to die tomorrow, at least we should do so after we complain a little and clear our minds from all our problems.

‘Your dad also passed away in this war? Shouldn’t that make you even more scared of dying too?’ I wonder after he brings the topic up.

‘I have nothing to lose at this point anymore,’ he laughs nervously, avoiding eye contact, ‘So why not make the best of this mess while I can?’

‘You can still lose your life,’ I point out, looking straight at his face and trying to decode his expression, but to no avail. I’ve known him for over an hour now and not once has he looked vulnerable, even when talking about such painful

memories. Maybe I am a little envious, now that my eyes are still red from crying about his deceased family dog.

‘No value to my life now,’ he mumbles, observing the stars above us, ‘Even if I were to survive, I wouldn’t have anywhere to go. I cannot face my mother and siblings, knowing I couldn’t protect him. Maybe I should just...’

I want to console him, tell him it’s going to be okay, but I know that’s what he wants to hear, not what he needs. We’re in the middle of a war - maybe it’s not going to be okay. Maybe neither of us are going to make it out alive. But right now, that’s not what matters. Now, as we sit under the starry sky, our only hope is that if we happen to meet our fates in this fight, we will see each other on the other side.

I lie down on the grass, grabbing his arm and pulling him down with me.

‘I will never get sick of this view,’ he whispers. I catch a glimpse of his watery eyes fixed on the moon. I pretend not to be aware of it, knowing he’s probably trying to hide the fact he’s on the verge of crying.

‘Then promise me you’ll try to stay alive. And once this is over, I promise I’ll find you and we can stare at the sky together a little more.’

‘That’s a big promise to make. Where will we go after that?’

‘Wherever our hearts lead us,’ I declare loudly, knowing what I just said was awfully cliché. He giggles and after conversing some more, he sings a song for me - the lyrics so dark but a melody so sweet. Before I know it, I wake up with Théo nowhere in sight.

‘I had that happen to me once,’ Winston shouts after listening to me explain my entire lore involving the short man, ‘One day I met this beautiful girl, and we fell in love and when I woke up she wasn’t anywhere to be fou-‘

‘Are you sure you didn’t dream of her, Winnie?’ Ohene interrupts him, finally confiscating the severely intoxicated man’s glass and putting it away. As they drunkenly argue over the existence of Winston’s potential partner, I ponder some more.

‘Have the French soldiers been escorted yet?’ I wonder, trying to wake the almost unconscious Winston up. After some inaudible sounds from his side, he manages to answer.

‘They’re leaving at sunrise.’

What am I waiting for?

I stand up and immediately start running towards what seems to be a camp nearby. It would’ve been easy to just ask someone for the directions to the French, but after the surreal set of events that have taken place today, I feel like fully trusting my intuition is sort of justified.

‘Where are you going?’ I hear a familiar voice behind me and I turn around to face Théo once more in his full roughly five feet tall glory.

‘Were you looking for me?’ he grins, watching me smile as I finally recognize him, ‘I didn’t think you’d want to willingly see me again.’

‘I keep my promises,’ I say, conveniently failing to mention my memory loss prior to this, ‘Although, I must admit that I am surprised you didn’t get shot back there.’

‘You aren’t getting rid of me that easily, I did try to stay alive, as I said I would. Also, I’m quite certain you promised to “go with me wherever our hearts lead us”, and I want to see what you mean by that.’

‘I can show you that right now.’

I grab his slender hand and we silently begin our journey, only occasionally exchanging smiles. This was the only battle that we have survived so far,

however we know there are still more of them lurking within the shadows. We both have our own wars with ourselves, our trauma being a stealthy and powerful enemy, but despite that, we now have a reason to keep pushing, since we have each other. We have a reason to look forward to the sunrise, since every tomorrow is so uncertain, and living to see the next day is a gift on its own. I hope the path we walk finally takes us where we belong.

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