

“Mother,” I lifted her head up. Her eyes widened as she looked at me. She knew that this could be the last time. “I promise, I’ll make it home,” I smiled at her, fighting the urge to cry. It was World War I, and joining the army was my only option. With no education, or talents, it was the only way to provide for my widowed mother. She had suffered from dementia not long after I lost my father.

She clutched my arm, her nails digging into me, “Don’t go, Charlie . . . you can always find another job. Can’t you mine for coal?”

My heart sank at her desperate plea to keep me home. I pulled a small locket from my coat. It was cheap and rusted, but it would carry my memory until I came back home. “Please, take it. It’ll remind you of me, just until I get back home.”

Her eyes watered, and she quickly hugged me. Her warm embrace being my only comfort. If I’m being totally honest, I wasn’t even sure if I’d see her again. I don’t know if it would be a lie to say I would.

The train was arriving, its heavy metal scratching against the tracks, soldiers around me said their final goodbyes. I pulled away from my mother. She hesitated to let go of me. I looked at her and smiled, kissed her on the cheek and boarded the train. As the train left the station, grieving mothers and fathers waved handkerchiefs, and wives blew kisses to their beloved husbands. I was glad I wasn’t leaving behind a family, after all I was only 19. As I leaned my head back against the ragged train cushions, my eyes teared up and I covered my face. The peaceful view of the countryside would be comforting to me, but with these grim circumstances I struggled to find it. I wiped my tears and looked around the small crowded room. There were men crammed in every corner. Some men were burly, some scrawny. It was obvious to me who had won the fights and who had lost. The one thing all the men had in common was their look of anticipation. This, I could not relate to. A small boy sat next to me. He was thin and malnourished. He couldn’t have been over 17.

“May I sit here?” he had a stutter and a lisp to his voice.

“Please do.” I smiled reassuringly and moved over patting the seat beside me. He sat down gingerly, as if making sure I wasn’t teasing him. I looked at him and tilted my head, he looked at me with confusion.

“What?” he said as he inched away from me.

“Nothing. . .” I paused and looked down. He looked hungry and more stressed than the other soldiers. I reached into my satchel and pulled out a small bar of chocolate. I had saved up

enough to buy my favorite kind. It was pricey, but worth every cent. "Here," I broke off a piece and handed it to him. He looked surprised and took it carefully

"Thank you." He shifted in his seat, as if uncomfortable. I leaned my head back to rest until we got to our barracks, but the uncomfortable ride kept me from any real sleep. Some time passed and steam leaked from the train, could this be it? I hopped to my feet to check the stir: men around me shoved through to exit the train. I suppose I could relate. This wasn't a particularly comfortable ride. They were anxious to get out. I finally stumbled my way to the exit, assuming a lovely stream of light would shine in. It never did. France was my home, but this looked nothing like it.

"Listen up soldiers!" A tall and burly man shoved his way through a large tent, mud squelching beneath his boots. "The trenches can't be reached by train!" He paced and eyed me, "We'll have to walk on foot." My eyes widened.

"Walk on foot?!" a man yelled. "You're insane!" another called.

"SILENCE!" The man yelled towards us as other soldiers surrounded us. They looked older and more experienced.

"Must be rookies. . ." a soldier sneered and clutched his gun. The scrawny boy glared and moved behind me.

"I'll be your commander, don't get too comfortable, got it?!" We all nodded quickly and backed up. "Let's move out!"

Water droplets fell from the sky. The boy shivered as he walked beside me. Men all around me slipped in the mud. It would be quite entertaining but I pitied them. I never expected us to be walking for days, but somehow we had. After the three days that seemed like forever, we arrived in our trenches. We all stopped dead in our tracks to look over the grotesque sight. The trenches looked freshly dug into the ground, debris of food and other provisions scattered through the mud.

"Don't be shy, c'mon." a soldier elbowed me and rolled his eyes as he walked down to the trench. I looked back at the boy then followed the soldiers into the trenches. I stepped over rotting food and dirty bandages with a grimace on my face.

"With these conditions, I'll bet we are gonna die of plague before we even reach the front line!" The soldiers laughed. I sighed and opened the warped wooden door that led to our dormitories. Hesitantly, I walked into the small, gloomy quarters. I hoisted my bags onto my bunk and sighed as I sat down.

“Here we are then. . .” someone mumbled next to me. “Oh-” I looked surprised. It was the small boy that I had met on the train. What a coincidence.

“I never even caught your name,” I eyed the boy and he looked down awkwardly.

“Thomas Burdy. “

I smiled, hoping to lighten the mood. “Charlie Bunker!” I shook his hand. I looked down for a moment as if thinking of what to say next.

“Why did you join the army?”

I looked surprised at the sudden question. “I beg your pardon?” I tilted my head with confusion.

“This war. It’s a death sentence for people like us. And people like our commander. It’s a lottery. Ever wondered why he wasn’t marching through the mud with us?” His once timid and shy voice turned spiteful. I didn’t know what he meant. Who was this boy?

“That seems quite exaggerated.” I looked at him with concern.

“Then some learn by experience.” He looked at me spitefully and narrowed his eyes.

By the time the sun went down, I was still pondering his words. I lit my lamp and laid down to sleep, pulling the dirty covers over myself. The thought crossed me: *These blankets belonged to just another soldier who had fallen. Were we really nothing but pawns in this war?* By the time morning arrived I had gotten no sleep, with the sounds of rats and soldiers coughing it was impossible. And added to that were Thomas’s words. *Was he right?*

“UP UP!” a soldier bursted in and blew a whistle. The soldier rushed over to my bunk and glared. “Slacking off, are we Bunkers?” He looked at me sternly and narrowed his eyes.

“No, sir . . .” I jumped to my feet and walked outside. It was pouring. Men around me ran frantically to care for the injured. Fallen soldiers on stretchers wailed. It was only the first day, and I had seen horrors like nothing I’d ever seen before. I stood there. A tired looking soldier patted me on the back,

“You’ll get used to it. We always do.”

I looked down, empty eyed, but what did I expect? I quickly rushed to help. The man wailed in pain as I lifted him off the ground.

“Please, just be still!” I kept my voice as calm as I could, but it was difficult in a time like this. When we finally arrived the man’s breath was labored. I looked around the medical tent as nurses rushed to and fro. I was amazed; there were more soldiers than I could count.

“You’re here for help?!” The nurse looked around frantically then back at me.

“No! Well- I mean yes, please get this soldier some medical attention!” The nurse eyed the soldier I had been carrying and sighed,

“Right . . . We will take him . . .” Two other nurses ran over and carried him off. I stood there for a moment then ran towards the bunker. Soldiers ducked their heads as bullets cut through the air.

“SOLDIERS! TO THE FRONTLINES!”

I emerged from the trenches with many other soldiers shoving me to get by. All around me they fell. I kept running, running until I was close enough to the enemy. Suddenly, I heard a cry for help. A soldier was caught in barbed wire. He struggled frantically; it only hurt him more. I ran over quickly, placing my hands over the wire. “You’ll get nowhere by struggling!” I quickly grabbed my gun, reached for the sharp blade on the end and twisted it off. The soldier’s eyes widened as he gripped my arm.

“You’ll hurt me! Are you mad?!”

I ignored and began cutting at the wire. Slowly, but surely, he was free. He shoved me and ran back to camp. If the commander was here he would be enraged. He’d call it “dishonorable,” as if the commander knew anything about honor. Too many of our soldiers were hurt. So many that I didn’t think it mattered if I fought too, as I ran back to our trenches. Someone needed to tell the commander that we needed to surrender. *You couldn’t call me dishonorable . . . Right?* My heavy boots skid against the mud and rainwater as I stopped at the commander’s quarters. “Let me in! Please, I have an urgent message for the commander!” I pleaded with the guards but they held me back from entering. I regretted what I did next, but it was the only way. I grabbed one of the guards and threw them down. He hit a rock and fell limp. I stopped dead in my tracks and looked down at him. The guard slowly got up, with the help of the other. I was glad that he was ok, but I had to get to the commander.

I slammed myself against the door and broke it forcefully. There seemed to be about five men in the quarters, all who seemed to be indulging in fresh croissants and teacakes. This wouldn’t matter had we not been in the middle of one of our fiercest battles. They looked at me with pure disgust. It was a degrading feeling.

“Soldier,” one of them spoke up and glared at me. I looked at the man

“I have an urgent message for the commander.” I looked around the room, my eyes scanning to find him.

“Then get on with it.” The commander stepped forth and rolled his eyes, seemingly annoyed with my very presence.

“Our soldiers are losing! We must retreat! We have lost too many lives!”

The commander then turned to the other men in the room stoically then chuckled, “I really do admire your determination to the cause, Mr . . . uhm.” He grabbed my name tag and nodded, “Bunkers.” He leaned closer to my face and sneered, “But I’m afraid these soldiers are only Frontline men. They have no importance, just their brawn.” He sighed and snapped his fingers, “Escort Mr. Bunkers out of my quarters.” He then sat down and took a sip of tea, grinning with contempt as the other soldiers dragged me out of his quarters.

I landed in the mud, still fazed with what our commander said. Slowly I rose to my feet, wiping the mud from my uniform. I looked at Thomas, who seemed to be waiting outside for me. He looked at me sadly and sighed,

“I told you. Some learn by experience.” He walked over to me, “I’m planning to leave. There’s no place for me here.”

I looked shocked and replied, “What do you mean by that?”

He placed his hand over my shoulder and narrowed his eyes, “I’m running away. Call me a coward, but I refuse to die on this stupid front.”

I looked at him. He was right. We had to leave.

“Then, I’ll go with you.”

He glanced over me. “We leave late tonight. Some will be on guard duty but, “ he chuckled, “usually they fall asleep in the first hour.” We quickly looked out to the frontline with shock as more and more people fell. “They’re going to draw us out of the trenches. Once we’re out, well.” I then looked back at the frontline and our enemy seemed to be dropping new types of bombs. *What? These weren’t bombs.* Instead, they seemed to fume.

“Tear gas.” Thomas grabbed my arm and led me away from the trenches. “We leave now or never!”

I looked down at the men in the trenches. *They didn’t seem to know about the gas. Maybe they didn’t know what it was.* We ran as fast as we could, into enemy lines, into the forest. I breathed heavily and stopped, my eyes lingering on the treetops. A soft breeze gently lifted the green foliage. It was beautiful. I stood there, entranced by the forest.

“We must go . . .” Thomas patted my shoulder and looked at me sincerely.

I sighed and nodded. Endlessly, we trudged through the forest as enemy jets flew overhead. Then after exactly three days, we arrived home. But, it wasn’t the same.

Thomas and I were seen as cowards, but I wasn’t going to die in the mud, and neither was Thomas. Somehow, all the jeers didn’t hurt me; real pain was the thought of coming home

to my mother as a craven soldier. My eyes teared up and my lips quivered as I knocked on the door of my mother's house. Slowly, she waddled to the door to open it. Her jaw dropped at the sight of me. I lowered my head.

"I'm sorry mother, you must be ashamed of me."

I must have been ranting for over five minutes until my mother grabbed my shoulders sternly and said,

"Charles Maloy Bunker." She wiped my tears then hugged me. Her eyes teared up as she looked at me, "I'll never be ashamed of you. Nothing in the world could make me." She pulled away, "I'm just happy you're okay. I thought I had lost you." She hugged me tightly again.

I smiled and hugged her back. Thomas, who was watching from afar, dipped his hat. I pulled away from my mother.

"No one wants to hear stories about cowards." She looked at me sympathetically, "but they love to hear stories of survivors, don't they?" A smile crept across my face as we walked inside, and I was finally home.