

Coffee at Midnight

It was a lonely war. It stomped across the countryside, devouring everything in its path, and the loneliness followed it. George felt its presence as he patrolled that night. The loneliness was a snake coiled about his neck, its fangs sunk deep into his chest. Its venom was cold and froze his whole body. George beat his hands together and stamped his feet to thrust the chill away. It would be easier with food in his stomach, he thought. He hadn't had a proper meal in weeks; the rail line didn't cut through this part of the country. He and his unit had carried their food in on their backs. He missed Anya's cooking, especially her pot roast and gravy.

The radio at his hip crackled but George couldn't make out any voices. He and Jerry had been out of range since they got here, even though they were still in their assigned area of patrol. It was a hilly wasteland, too hot in the summer for crops and too cold in the winter for cattle. Stumpy bushes, made brittle skeletons by October's winds, were the sole occupants of the worthless land for miles. The one redeeming quality, or curse, was that the most direct route to the capital from the north was through this patch of hills.

George glanced off into the darkness. The coils shifted around his neck and made his skin prickle. Jerry had thought he'd heard something and gone to investigate. He'd insisted on leaving George behind. "There's no sense in both of us dying," he'd said and George had quickly agreed. He was too tired to chase phantoms.

But Jerry had been gone too long. George hadn't heard a shot but he still worried. There were quiet ways of killing a man.

The bushes crackled and he stiffened, his hand automatically rising to his pistol. The coils tightened sharply. Then he felt the wind rush through the seams of his hat and he shivered, his scalp prickling. He would have shot at nothing.

‘What am I becoming?’ he wondered. ‘What if it were Jerry?’

He’d have to make sure these habits disappeared when he got home. Anya wouldn’t like it if he pulled a knife on her while she was dusting. He pictured her with her dish rag in hand, hair pulled back in its usual messy bun, giving him her best, ‘If you do that one more time, I promise you will regret it’ look. He smiled at the image. But it was gone before he could really look at it and was replaced by the last time he’d seen her. Her hand was limp, its grace and energy lost. George determinedly blinked. The coils pulsed around his neck, the rhythm almost soothing.

A stick crunched behind him but this time, George didn’t turn around. He said, “What took so long? I thought you were dead, Jerry.”

“And I thought you were Harold.”

The voice was unfamiliar.

With a hiss resounding in his ear, George turned and locked eyes with the enemy. The enemy stared back, as still as George. He looked like all the other men in George’s squad- wind-burned and hungry. But his green uniform identified him as one of Prince Julian’s soldiers. It made him the enemy.

Slowly, George’s hand inched back to his pistol. “Where’s Jerry?” he asked. He had to get the draw on this man before the man got the draw on him.

The man jerked his head back the way he'd come. "I got him before he could get Harold."

George had been expecting this but his hand fell limp all the same. The snake unwound from his neck and curled about his chest, its weight pulling him down. George took a step to maintain his balance. Jerry was such a large, energetic man that it seemed an insult that this slip of a soldier had been the one to end him. His wife was having a baby in two months' time. She had written a letter the month before. She hoped he would come home for Christmas to meet his new son. It was a vain hope. Yes, they'd gone home the year before, but the war hadn't been dragging on then.

"I don't suppose you've seen Harold?" the man asked.

"He'd be dead if I had," George responded. The snake constricted its coils suddenly, making him gasp, but the man didn't seem to notice. He nodded his head, acknowledging George's comment. His right hand hung by his side.

'I should shoot him,' George thought, 'now, while he's not paying attention.'

But his hand didn't resume its slow journey back to his pistol. The snake slithered up George's arm to coil around his neck once more and began to squeeze.

Jerry had been his sole companion for days now. The captain had heard word of enemy activity in the area, probably seeking an easy route to the capital, and off they went, George, Jerry, and two others, to scout for enemy soldiers. They'd set up camp to keep watch and within hours, Walters was gone. He was just a kid. George had known the moment he met him that he

didn't know what he was in for. Neither had George when he first signed up. But he handled it better than a kid just out of school.

Michaels had complained about long wars and the corrupt government that would result regardless of who won. By day three, George and Jerry had told him to shut up. They'd found him dead in his tent the next morning, fingers loose around his pistol.

Now it was just George and the man who had killed George's only proof that another man existed for miles. George tugged at the coils but they didn't loosen their grip. He couldn't breathe.

"I suppose I ought to shoot you," the man said. "My orders are to shoot on sight. My captain said there would be scouts out."

"Mine, too," George responded. He was surprised he had breath to talk. He waited for the man to reach for his gun but his hand stayed down and so did George's. The snake hissed threateningly in his ear.

'The cold must be affecting my hand,' George thought. 'This man killed Jerry.' Surely Jerry deserved some reparation.

"Do you think maybe your man did get Harold? I haven't seen him and I thought I heard a shot before I got your man."

"He probably did. Jerry's quick like that."

"Jerry," the man repeated.

“His wife’s having their first in two months, a boy.” The coils tightened sharply, making George gasp.

A shadow passed over the man’s face.

The wind blew again and found its way back into George’s hat. The other man shivered, too. He stared at George, then said, “We hadn’t been out that long. I’ve still got some coffee in my thermos. Want some?”

Coffee from Jerry’s killer?

George’s gaze darted from the thermos to the man and back. Was that supposed to make him feel better? Jerry was still dead. Leftover coffee wouldn’t change that.

“All right,” George heard himself agree. He reached out and took the thermos and tossed a sip back, swallowing hard. It was cold and made him grimace in distaste but the thick aroma sent him back to mornings with Anya. He could almost hear the coffee dripping in the pot and smell the bacon sizzling on the stove. “Thanks.” He took another sip and this one went down easier; the coils loosened, making it easier to swallow. He regarded the man over the top of the thermos. He looked about George’s age, with blonde hair and a mustache. George passed the thermos back.

“Henry.”

“George.”

Henry shuffled the thermos between his hands. “Why Peter?”

“Why Julian?”

“I’ve got to feed my wife and little ones.”

“And it pays better than street clean-up,” George finished.

Henry nodded and sipped his coffee. “I don’t see why they couldn’t have duked it out between themselves instead of dragging the whole country into a war. That’s what the rest of us would have done. Instead, we’re still cleaning up after their bombs.”

“This is why the common man doesn’t have armies,” George observed. “I don’t particularly side with one or the other. My taxes give Peter his income, so here I am.”

Henry nodded. “Same.”

‘I shouldn’t be talking to you,’ George thought. ‘I should just pop you off.’ The snake purred its encouragement. But he still couldn’t raise his gun.

Henry offered him the thermos again and George took another sip. “I haven’t had good coffee in a long time,” he said. “No one has time to brew it properly here. They just throw it together; it’s flavored water. Anya says it’s all in how you blend the beans.” He pictured Anya in their tight pantry, scooping coffee beans out of the tin with her hand and bringing them to her nose to smell them before tilting her hand to let them fall into the grinder like grains of sand. He could smell the sharp aroma of the beans lingering in the air. The coils around his neck slackened and started to slip down his back.

“Is Anya your wife?” Henry asked.

George nodded.

Henry reached into his coat pocket and pulled out two photographs. “Here.” He handed them to George.

He looked down at a small, dark haired woman, then at two boys with toothy grins and a little girl with blonde pigtails. He brushed green fuzz off the little girl’s face. The edges of the photos were wearing and the images faded.

“Bess is my wife,” Henry said, “and the boys are Charlie and Andrew. They’re ten and eight. Eliza is five.”

“They’re nice.” George had gone numb. He passed the photos and the coffee back.

“How old are yours?” Henry asked.

“Allison’s nine.” He saw her giggling on the kitchen floor as the dog kissed her, then tucked up in bed, waiting for her good night kiss. “I love you, Daddy,” he heard her say, then heard the crash of the bombs and her screams. He saw the kitchen blown away and blinked to get rid of the image.

“Do you live near the capital?” Henry asked. He smoothed his fingers over the photos, tracing each small face.

“Ten miles out. I had a restaurant.” Anya had been so proud the morning they opened. “I want to serve the first cup of coffee,” she’d said. “It is my restaurant, after all,” and she’d winked. *Anya’s* had been a small brick building nestled between the grocers and the post office, specializing in home-cooked food and good conversation served with the best cup of coffee outside His Majesty’s kitchen.

“Did you go under from lack of customers or the food rations?” Henry asked.

George shook his head. “You can’t eat at a restaurant that’s not there.” He tilted his head back and let out a long, foggy breath. The snake slowly began to unwind from his neck. Deep in his chest, the icy fangs released their grip. Warmth crept back into his chest and started to spread out like blood to his whole body. He exhaled again, pushing the venom out in one great, smoky cloud, and watched it hang before him and wondered how he’d managed to breathe through all that ice.

“I was a pencil-pusher,” Henry said. George watched as he swept his thumb over his wife’s face once more, then tucked the photos into his breast pocket. “I hated it but it got me off the farm, and it gave me Bess. I always wanted to be a soldier, though. I practiced shooting and marching when I was a kid so I’d be ready for a war just like the one in Great-Grandpa Fred’s stories.” He huffed out his breath. “Now that I’m here, the farm is the only place I want to be. What I wouldn’t give to shear a sheep right now.”

“Where are you going back to?” George asked.

“Netherfield.”

“Prince Julian has a base near there, doesn’t he?”

Henry nodded.

“I heard the area got bombed pretty bad when King Peter retaliated last fall.”

Henry nodded again. He raised a hand to pat his breast pocket.

They lapsed into silence. Henry’s hand moved in slow circles over his pocket. George breathed, expelling the last of the venom and blowing it away with a swoosh! It seemed to rise

up into the air and drift away out of sight to land on some other man and consume him. George instantly felt lighter. The warmth continued to seep through him.

“It’s nice out here,” Henry said. His hand had fallen to his side and he stared up at the frozen stars. “It reminds me of when I was a kid on the farm.”

George looked up at the glistening sky and nodded. He breathed in, the air biting his lungs, and in that breath, he was no longer George and Henry was no longer Henry. Blue and green uniforms did not exist. In that breath, they were two children, and everything around them stopped. Even George’s heart seemed to cease its steady beat.

Then George exhaled and they were George and Henry again, blue uniform and green uniform, and the world was an inescapable presence.

George’s gaze slid down to Henry, who was once more calmly meeting his eye. “I can’t let you go,” George said.

Henry nodded. “I know.”

George looked at Henry and let himself slide behind his eyes and he knew. He looked away and glanced around the wasteland, his gaze lingering in the south where miles away, the capital’s lights twinkled and a hollowed-out brick building sat waiting. He looked up at the stars and for the first time that night, they winked at him, teasing him with their nearness. George looked back at Henry and saw his own face reflected at him.

“Together, then?” he asked.

“Together,” Henry repeated.

Their hands inched down and this time, two sets of fingers grasped identical pistols. There were two metallic clicks as the weapons were cocked; they were coffee cups clinking together as Anya washed them. And then the loneliness was shattered.