

## *Trenches*

There are only four men left when the last shell is launched.

Anton, the youngest, sits near the entrance to the trench. He circles his thumb over a small piece of paper. He traces over every wrinkle. A receipt from four months ago. The last grocery order he picked up for his mother before being deployed.

The mortar shell screams through the sky.

“Five eggs, stick of butter, cup of sugar, tablespoon of salt,” says Anton.

“What?” general Irving says. He crouches against the trench wall.

Anton snaps out of his trance. He pulls himself up to his feet. He scans the sky. His boots sink into the grey mud.

The cry of the shell tears over the trench. It strikes the ground 100 yards away. The blast ruptures the air. Dirt from the blast obscures the sun and rains down to the shattered ground.

The walls tremble. Tiny cascades of dirt roll onto general Irving’s shoulders. He shouts to Anton, but the mortar blast is all that anyone can hear.

Irving motions for Anton to come closer.

The young private high steps through the mud. Every step swallowed up to the ankles. He grimaces at the sight and smell. Cold hands of death, some of the men call it. Anton calls it what it is.

“It’s mostly shit, sir.” Says Anton.

“We gotta get to the next trench before they shell us again,” says Irving. “Gonna have to carry Vinny. I’ll get Markos. We can’t sit here any longer.”

Anton wipes sweat from his eyes. He’s still clinging to the receipt.

“Private,” says Irving, “what’s that?”

Anton stuffs the paper into his boot and marches away.

“Five eggs, stick of butter, cup of sugar, tablespoon of salt.”

Anton repeats the list to himself. His voice shakes more with each refrain. As he pulls himself through the slop, he takes extra care to step over every dog tag, helmet, pocket watch and every letter that will never make it home.

He finally reaches Vinny.

“Hey, Vin,” he says, “we gotta cross. Irving says we’re fucked.”

“Irving said that?” says Vinny.

“Well, not those words.”

The men laugh. Anton crouches next to Vinny and checks his bandages. He pokes around the entry sites and watches Vinny’s face.

“You gotta carry me?” Vinny says.

Anton chuckles. Vinny is nearly a foot taller than Anton, and at least 40 pounds heavier.

“Either I carry you or we both die.” says Anton.

Vinny shrugs and grins at Anton. His mouth is gapped and pink with blood. He begins to cry.

“Anton,” says Vinny, “what the shit is that little piece of paper you’re always fondling?”

Anton scoffs. He pats the side of his boot.

“A cake,” Says Anton, “my ma’ called it Sun Cake. She’d make it first day of every summer.”

Vinny nods. He takes Anton’s hand.

Anton presses his forehead against Vinny’s.

“Let’s go,” says Anton, “when we make it back home, my mom will make it for us.”

Anton hoists Vinny over his shoulder. He leans against the trench wall to bolster his effort. The mud gurgles and eats its way up to Anton’s ankles.

“Five eggs, stick of butter, cup of sugar, tablespoon of salt,” says Anton.

Irving emerges from around a curve in the trench with Markos’ duffle bag slung over his shoulder. He pauses.

Anton frowns.

Irving nods. He pulls himself through the mud to help the men over the trench wall. He digs his toes into the wall and raises himself out.

Machine gun fire rattles across the field. Plumes of dirt and shrapnel jump from the earth.

Irving throws himself at Anton and Vinny.

Vinny tumbles to the ground, face down.

Anton spins to try to catch Vinny. His grip fails him. His breath is punched out of his body. His knees give out.

Irving tumbles back, yanking Vinny by the shoulder to pull him back into the trench. The two men sack into the mud, shoulders first. The final rounds of machine gun fire snap at their heels as they slip past the top of the wall.

The world goes silent. No shells rupturing the atmosphere. No shouts of men ordering men forward to advance or back to retreat.

“We gotta get his boots,” says Vinny, “his Ma’s cake recipe.”

“Tomorrow,” says Irving, “we’ll make enough for both sides.”

Irving closes his eyes. The mud climbs up to his ears.

“I’ll send a message out,” says Irving, “tomorrow.”

**XXX**