

A SYNSK
NOVELLA
BY
K.C. FINN

THE POISON SKY

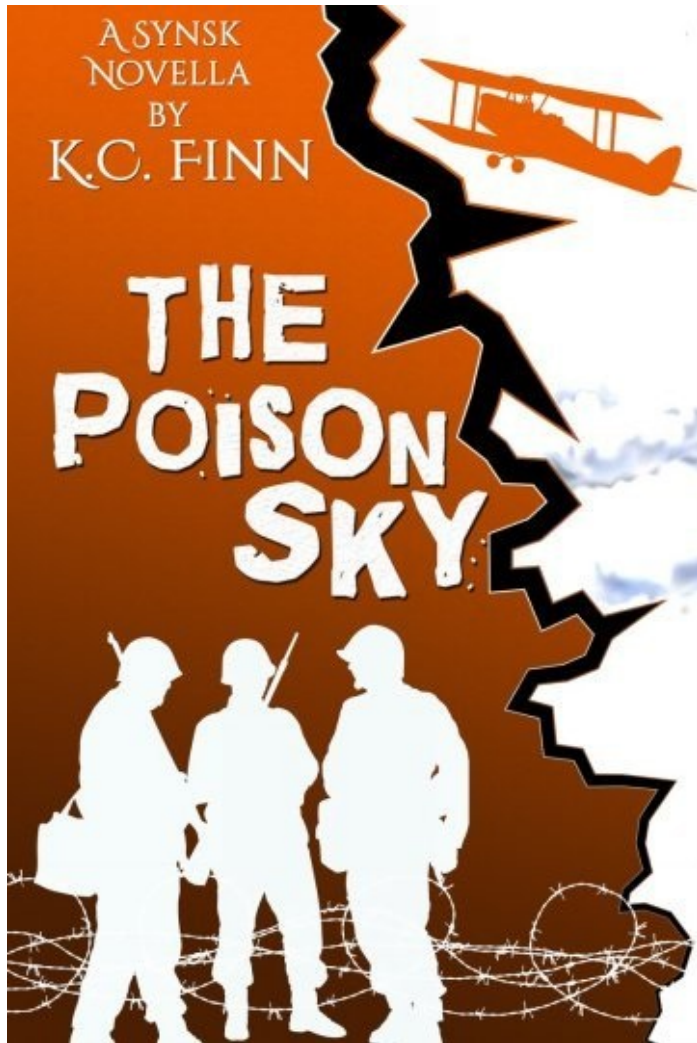


The Poison Sky

A Synsk Novella

(Synsk 2.5)

K.C. FINN



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A Note From The Author

Like all authors of historical fiction, I am frequently accused of ‘not doing my research

when an inaccuracy is found in my work. I feel the need, therefore, to clarify that The Poison Sky, and indeed any other book in the Synsk series, is not to be taken as a historical textbook. It is my aim to recreate the atmosphere and harsh atrocities that soldiers faced during wartime, but it is also my quest as a writer to bend history to my will in order to tell an engaging story.

*I would like to think if you are willing to believe that Reggie Arkwright is a psychic spy with incredible powers of the mind, then you will also accept that my version of the event of April 22nd 1915 takes place at 3 a.m. rather than the historically documented time of 5 p.m.. For most of my wonderful readers, I'm sure this will be the case, and I thank you for supporting my version of history over the last eight months since *The Mind's Eye* was released.*

For those of you who can't get past the facts to enjoy the fiction, I apologise for my artistic licensing. It is important to remember, however, that even history textbooks are written by authors, and what we sometimes take to be fact can also be its own version of the truth. History is recorded by the winners, after all.

It is a very strange experience to sit in the room of someone you know will never use it again. Kit Cavendish had done exactly that, many years ago in the study at Ty Gwyn, in the room that had once belonged to Clive Price, a hero pilot who died facing the Bosch in the Second World War. Now she was situated in the room of her grandmother, Mabel Arkwright, a woman who died facing a sea of dirty dishes in the back kitchen of the Sand Drifts Inn. At the valiant age of seventy-two, Nannie had dropped on the spot, working her fingers to the bone until she drew her last breath. Kit suspected that she would have wanted it that way.

Kit listened to Elvis Presley crackling through on the radio, rubbing one hand over her large, swollen stomach. When the King sang his soul out to ‘Heartbreak Hotel’, the baby in Kit’s belly gave a powerful kick. Her first child, Hanne, had never been a kicker, but this little bundle had been jostling for weeks now. She shushed at her tummy, rubbing it again and reclining on her grandmother’s spongy old double bed. Her eyes travelled to the sight of the discarded funeral clothes strewn over the dresser. She had clambered into a more comfortable housedress from the moment she’d made it up the stairs.

Hanne was turning twelve this year and, as such, Kit had had a long time to forget how exhausting it was to be pregnant. Her lifelong arthritis was severe enough to make it difficult to walk, even at her normal, slender weight, but this second baby was heavier than she remembered Hanne being, and twice as volatile to carry. After Hanne, Kit had been so exhausted that another child seemed out of the question for a very long time, but Henri had always harboured a hope that they might try again for a boy someday. Kit could only hope that he was getting his wish, because Baby Number Three was definitely not an option.

The faint sound of a door closing caught her ears, and Kit soon heard a gaggle of voices ascending the stairs. As they reached her landing, someone made a loud shushing noise, then a series of slow, muffled footsteps tapered off in all directions close-by. Moments later, the door to her grandmother’s bedroom opened and Henri’s clean-shaven face poked around the frame. His small, dark eyes were narrowed in a smile as they found those of his wife.

“You’re awake,” he said brightly. “I was afraid you might have exhausted yourself crying at the church.”

He stepped into the room as Kit shook her head slowly.

“I might have if I’d stayed any longer, but I’m rested now,” she assured him. “How was the wake?”

“Leighton’s drunk,” Henri replied as he closed the bedroom door.

Moving to a suitcase propped up on the dressing stool, the tall Norwegian stepped out of his shoes and started to change his clothes. Kit watched the lines of her husband’s muscular body as he stripped off his shirt. He was thirty-seven now, almost a middle-aged man, but the fitness regime he had started as a boy in the army had stayed with him every year since. His broad shoulders flexed

he turned, spying his wife over his shoulder with a grin.

“Are you sure you won’t come with us to the Pleasure Beach?” he asked her. “It might be nice for you, seeing Hanne, Josie, and Dai on the rides. I always find children are the best company after a funeral.”

He had never lost the thickness to his accent, and his foreign tone enveloped Kit so much that she could almost have agreed to his persuasions. The baby gave her another kick, as if to remind her, and she winced suddenly.

“No,” she concluded, shaking her head. “I’ve spent enough energy for one day. Besides, I could hardly go rollercoaster-ing in this condition.”

Henri’s navy shirt was only half-buttoned as he climbed across the bed on hands and knees, his face coming level with the bump of Kit’s stomach under the bed blankets. He pulled the covers back and rested his ear against her belly with a hopeful smile. A moment later, he jolted, and Kit winced once more.

“He kicked me in the face!” Henri exclaimed. “This boy’s going to be sporty, I just know it.”

Kit only smiled. She hoped, for his sake, that he was right, for a child who had this much energy in the womb was going to need an outlet for it later in life. Henri climbed a little farther up the bed and kissed Kit’s lips gently. The grief for her grandmother lifted a little in the warmth of his affection.

“It’s a shame,” she mused sadly. “Nannie never got to see the baby born.”

Henri studied her face carefully, concern ebbing away at his smile.

“Are you sure you’ll be all right if we go out again with the children?” he asked. “Because you need me, I can stay.”

“I just need to rest,” Kit assured him, secretly grateful that he was keeping the family going without her for the rest of the day.

“Well, Leighton is passed out in the little utility room,” Henri explained, kissing her forehead. “and Steven’s gone to bed for an hour or so. He said he didn’t sleep well here last night, but if you need him, you can shout.”

“Thank you, I will,” Kit replied, feeling no guilt whatsoever at the prospect of waking the grumpy doctor.

“Oi!” A bright Welsh voice called from downstairs. “Are you ready or what? I’ve got three mad kids yur waiting to get the tram!”

Henri opened the door midway through the call, drowning out Kit’s little radio with the singsong cries of the woman outside.

“Coming, Blod!” he called back.

He paused again at the door, buttoning the rest of his shirt as he watched his wife for a silent smiling moment.

“You’re sure you’ll be—”

“Don’t ask me again,” she cut in with a knowing grin. “I’m fine. Go away and have fun.”

Henri flashed her a grin, stepped back into his shoes, and disappeared down the corridor. There were footsteps again, then the sound of another door slamming, and then there was just Kit and the baby and the radio once more. Buddy Holly was alive and well in the words of his last hit. It made Kit frown to think of her daughter then. In February, Hanne had mourned the loss of the great singing icon as if he were a personal friend. Now her great-grandmother was gone, too. It was a shame that Hanne was experiencing so much death at her tender age.

The door opened once more, and Kit jumped out of her reverie. Pale blue eyes spotted her with a conspiratorial look.

“Have they gone?”

Kit nodded. Steven Bickerstaff stepped into the room, closing the door behind him with a relieved sigh. He cut a dash in his jet-black funeral suit, perching on the end of Kit’s bed and running his hands through his silver-blond hair.

“Henri said you were sleeping,” Kit mused.

Bickerstaff gave a chuckle. “I was cleverly avoiding dragging three wild teenagers around a massive amusement park all evening,” he explained. “I slept fine in the back bedroom. This place is exactly how I remember it.”

“You haven’t been here since Josie was born?” she asked him.

The doctor shook his head.

“Old Mrs. Arkwright kept this place going through some hard times,” he mused, “and all of her own, too, I’m told.”

“Her husband, my Granddad Reg, died when I was thirteen,” Kit explained.

“He must have been young,” Bickerstaff said quietly.

“Forty-nine,” Kit answered. “It was cancer. A melanoma, I think.”

“God, that’s my age,” the doctor said, his face growing grave and pale. “She bought this place after that?”

“And ran it for more than twenty years,” Kit completed with a hollow sigh.

Bickerstaff hunched forward on the end of the bed, his chin resting on one hand as the other reached down to his trouser leg. Kit could see him adjusting the place where his false leg met his knee until the baby gave her another boot and she jolted once more. Bickerstaff noted the curl in her lip and the way her hand went instinctively to her belly.

~~“It’s a very healthy sign, that kicking,” he said, trying to smile.~~

“In that case, I do believe I’m giving birth to Superman,” Kit concluded.

“I should leave you to rest,” the doctor said, starting to rise again.

“No,” Kit said quickly.

She wasn’t certain what had made her blurt it out, but when Bickerstaff paused, she was grateful.

“You don’t want to be alone?” he tried, studying her confused look.

“I don’t know,” Kit answered, her shoulders drooping. “I do, but I don’t. Grief’s a funny thing, isn’t it?”

Bickerstaff stood and slipped off his jacket, limping across the room to hang it on the back of the chair beside Kit’s bed. He looked around the room appraisingly, his hands hovering at his pockets like he wasn’t quite sure what to do with them. The doctor’s gaze settled on a small bookshelf in the corner, and he ambled towards it.

“Perhaps we could read awhile,” he suggested. “What sort of story do you like?”

Kit was relieved at his suggestion, knowing that Steven Bickerstaff wasn’t famed for his social graces. Reading quietly together would be comforting, but not awkward. She watched him lean on the little case as he crouched to view the titles on its two small shelves.

“Something cheery,” she told him.

He picked a book out, looked at its cover, and replaced it, repeating the process all along the top shelf with increasing irritation.

“Romantic drama, romantic drama, romantic drama,” he whined. “Didn’t your grandmother ever read anything else?”

Kit thought on the idea for a moment. Nannie had lost her husband all too soon. It was understandable that reminders of the sweetness of love might fill the shelves up here in her private sanctuary.

“Oh, blast!”

Bickerstaff suddenly overbalanced his weight, falling backwards as the bookcase threatened to topple with him. He managed to stop the little unit from landing on his legs, but not before all of the books had come tumbling out into a heap. With a rueful grimace, the doctor started picking the tomes up to replace them from where he sat on the floor. Kit bit back her laughter at his sour face, until she saw him pause. Bickerstaff’s heavy brow relaxed into an expression of curiosity.

“Well now, what’s this?” he asked.

He held up an object for Kit to see. It was a book, but one that was much smaller than the

others, one that looked like a notebook rather than a hardback. Its paper was yellowed, and its cover was singed at the bottom right corner, as if it had survived a fire. Its small pages and brown leather cover were bundled up in a tight piece of string with an ancient knot, one that hadn't been undone for quite some time. The doctor pulled at the stiff string until it gave way, opening the notebook up.

"It's a diary," he mused in amazement.

"Not Nannie's diary?" Kit asked, feeling a lump of grief quiver in her throat again.

Bickerstaff met her gaze, looking astounded. "I think not," he replied.

He handed her the notebook with the first page open. In blotted, shaky ink, two lines of writing glared at her from the old paper.

This is the diary of Corporal Reginald James Arkwright.

Loyal North Lancashire Regiment: Covert Operations Division

Kit read the words aloud to Bickerstaff, who climbed into the bedside chair as he listened to her.

"That's your grandfather's diary, isn't it?" he asked.

Kit flicked through a few pages, nodding fervently.

"From the war," she said. "The first war. The Great War. This is..."

She caught a page where the word **psychic** was clearly inscribed in her grandfather's old scribbly script. She had seen that same writing on old birthday cards in a box at home, but she hadn't given much thought to the man that the writing belonged to for many, many years now. Yet here he was, in ink and paper, the days of his life inscribed for all to see.

"He wrote about everything," she said in amazement. "This is all the work he did for Great Britain as a psychic spy."

"Everything that Mabel never knew about him," Bickerstaff said sadly, "and it's been hiding behind the back of her bookcase all this time."

The baby gave Kit another kick, and the book jumped out of her grip. It tumbled down the bed where Bickerstaff caught it, taking an opportunity to examine the pages again. A tense fascination kept the pair of them in silence as Kit reclined, thinking about the precious diary and the kind of knowledge it contained. She patted her stomach as she lay in thought.

"Read it to me," she said.

Bickerstaff looked up from the small book, blue eyes wide and waiting.

Kit gave a shrug. "Nobody's ever known what Granddad Reg really did for our country in those years back. He deserves to have his story told, now that it doesn't have to be kept secret from Nannie anymore."

“It might be grisly,” the doctor mused, thumbing a few pages again. “I thought you said you wanted something cheery?”

“This feels right,” Kit replied. “Go on. From the beginning.”

Steven Bickerstaff appraised the book once more, rifling back to the first proper page scrawled, inky text.

“As you wish.”

People have stopped believing in peace.

When I joined the regiment at the age of nineteen, I didn't do it because I wanted to go to war. Defending our great nation was enough for me, that and the fact that it was the only way to escape taking up the family business as a greengrocer. You show me a young man who wants to stare at cabbages for the rest of his life, and I'll eat my hat, every thick, scratchy scrap of it. When I signed on for the British Army in 1897, the Greeks were fighting the Turks in their usual way, but Europe, for the most part, was united. As the years have gone by, the bonds of the world's greatest continent only seemed to be getting stronger.

Until that Duke got himself shot in the face. At first, it didn't seem to matter to Blighty that the Serbs and the Austrians were fighting but, somewhere along the way, the Kaiser from Germany got himself involved. The papers paint him as a puerile thing, a man with a withered arm and an ugly chair on his shoulder to match. He pushed the Austrians into waging a war that's put the whole of Europe on a suicide watch. And now Great Britain has stuck its long nose in too.

They moved me to Dover in August, around the same time as the first few battalions of seasoned men went out to France to help defend against the Germans who are invading there. We're supposed to be stopping them from taking Paris, but I don't see how only a few squads are going to help. I guess Lord Kitchener's got that covered. The news from London is that even the likes of Rudyard Kipling are out there convincing the young men of England to join our ranks. They get to make a choice about whether they want to be in this war or not. I just happened to be here already.

Corporal Reginald James Arkwright, Reggie to my friends, and 'the psychic one' to the people who have yet to get to know me. Since I've been stationed at Dover, I've spent every day in the Commanding Officer's office, sending my mind out to discover the apparent secrets of the German forces. The truth is, they don't seem to be faring any better than us right now. It's only their sheer numbers that are allowing them to smash through every barricade from the Reichstag to Paris in less than a month. The Major often tells me that this whole thing is going to be a numbers game.

"That's why we need so many bodies, young Reggie," he snorts. "Throw enough men at them and they'll soon be back across the Rhine with their tails between their legs, warmongering dogs that they are."

Young Reggie. I'm twenty-six. I have a wife and a child of my own, and I don't much like the sound of being a body to be thrown at the Germans as they continue their march of terror through the once-peaceful countryside of Europe. Lucky for me, I have my psychic skills. It looks like my wife will be fought and lost from an office in Dover, just like the Major's.

My power is a rare one: a unique ability to take my conscious mind and place it in the heads of others, ready to observe their activities and report them back to my commanding officer. I can even pass messages and communicate with them if I want to. I'm told it sounds something like having an echo inside your head. I don't think I'd much like it if it happened to me, but I'm the only one of my

kind that I know. When I was twelve, my mother thought she heard me speak into her mind (which had) and quickly rushed me to the men in white coats. Lucky for me, the military got word and made the decisions about my life from there on in, else I'd probably be in a straitjacket right now.

I'm only supposed to use my powers when commanded by a C.O., but in late September, I couldn't resist the temptation. This new lot of fellas arrived from the Foot Guards, older than me and as tough as nails by the looks of them. Every single one of them was Welsh. A Lieutenant by the name of Idrys Pengelly caught my eye. He was ten years older than me and built like a brick you-know-what. All the privates that he was responsible for looked up to him, and he walked around with this booming voice and flaming red hair that made him look like his head was always on fire. He was a happy lad but a bit of a show-off for my taste.

One of the fellas who'd been in the forces a few years told him about my gift, and the huge Welshman sought me out and invited me to his billet. He proposed a challenge to see if my skills were what I claimed they were, and of course I accepted. I was never one to shy away from a bit of attention. His men locked me in the lavatory and, for one horrible moment, I thought they were just going to leave me there and let that be that. It turned out they did have a purpose for the confinement. I had to follow the mind of one of their boys, a chap called Billy, and report back to them on what he did when he was alone in the billet.

The kid went around switching things in and out of other people's packs, hiding helmets under beds and stashing magazines and smokes in secret places, probably thinking that even the luckiest guesser couldn't stumble upon them there. I didn't need to guess, for his mind was easy pickings for a man of my skills. I didn't even need to think that hard, all I had to focus on was remembering where he'd stashed everything. Afterwards, I sauntered back into the billet, found all the goods, and made the right song and dance about how clever I was for doing it.

It turns out that this Idrys bloke is all right, actually. He's a family man like me, though his kids are quite a bit older. His youngest daughter, Gladys, has just turned sixteen. I can't imagine my little Gail turning sixteen. She's eight right now, a tiny child with strawberry-blonde curls and shining eyes. I love to see those eyes sparkling in the last bright sunlight on the cusp of autumn, even though it's not me that she's looking at when I visit her.

That's another thing I'm not supposed to use my powers for.

My wife, Mabel, has no idea how many times I've been in her head. Sometimes at night, when I miss home, I just drift into her thoughts and watch her washing dishes whilst Gail runs rings around her, chattering on about everything under the sun. I can feel my wife's warmth and annoyance in equal measure when Gail's off on a tangent about whatever wonderful storybook she's been reading, and it makes me wish that I could talk to Mabel more often. If she knew how hard it was for me to be away for me to commit to the war with the knowledge that I won't be able to visit her or Gail for such a long time, then maybe she'd tone down the annoyance with our daughter a little. I don't think she realises how precious those irritating moments are.

She can't know about my gift, though. I tried to tell her once, years ago when we were first married, and she was so horrified by the idea of what she called 'ungodly, supernatural freaks' that she didn't dare admit to her that I was one of them. I just left the idea hanging in the air, like a work of

literature, some new, science-fiction supposition for the next H.G. Wells to tackle. It broke my head back then to think that she might have left me because of my gift, but now I'm usually all right with the idea of keeping it secret from her. My mother always says that secrets keep a family healthy and so far for me, that's been the truth.

The autumn of 1914 is the age of mobilisation. Outside of these barracks, people like to chat about the war like they know what they're talking about. I venture, in my mind, to the streets of London sometimes, listening for gossip and getting 'the general morale', as the Major likes to call it. People say the stupidest things when they think only their friends can hear them. They say things like "It's only mobilisation. Mobilisation isn't war."

Except that it is, because when two opposing groups mobilise towards one another, don't tell me that one or the other isn't going to start a fight when they meet. We are at war, and the Major General isn't afraid to have every weapon at our disposal on display. I'm his prized possession, a highly trained, psychic spy, ready to infiltrate every nook and cranny of enemy territory without even leaving the billet in Dover. All through my army life, my superiors have encouraged me to train my mind just as hard as my body, even though there were only a select few who were party to my secrets back then. Now, the time has come to use my skills at last. England is at war, and I am one of its greatest defenders.

Though not everyone sees it that way.

"You're a lucky bugger, you are," said Idrys, rolling his tobacco up in its paper tube. "We got our mobilisation orders today. Channel crossing with submarine guard tomorrow morning, and we'll be in Belgium by October the first. And what will you be doing? You'll be yur, chatting up the canteen girls and swanning about in people's heads, won't you?"

He nudged me in the shoulder from where he stood, looking down at me. I was staring at a particular smudge on the tip of my shoe that I hadn't been able to polish clean. It took me a moment to pull my eyes from the spot and process what he'd actually said to me. When I realised what he was getting at, I knew I didn't have a good reply. He and his fellow Welshmen would be out there soon, battling the Krauts firsthand, and I would still be sitting on that shallow bunk, waiting for the next influx of soldiers to pass through on their way to the real war in Belgium.

"Oh, isn't that lovely?" Idrys boomed jovially. "Reggie's speechless. He's gonna miss me boys!"

A chorus of laughter ricocheted through the billet. I'd been moved in with the Foot Guards not long after my little stunt with Billy, to make room for new, young soldiers who were training in the other section of the barracks. I reached up and smacked Idrys hard in the leg, and he choked on his cigarette as he laughed again.

"I'm only messing with you, buttie," he said through an exhale of smoke. "You'll be able to give us the Major's secrets when we've gone, eh? Psychic news from home, it'll be grand."

"And I'll check on Betty and your kids, as promised," I added.

He glanced down at me again, eyes turning serious for a moment as the smile faltered on his face.

“You know how much I’ll appreciate that, boyo,” he replied.

Idrys knew that I couldn’t actually pass any messages to his wife - the secrecy act that we had all signed restricted anyone outside of the Dover base from knowing what I could do - but he said that he’d be grateful just to know I’d seen them happy and healthy from time to time. I understood perfectly why he had asked me to do it. It was hard enough to be a country’s length apart from my own family, let alone to be miles and miles overseas on the Western Front.

“Right then, lads, let’s get to packing,” Idrys ordered briskly. “Don’t want to forget something important now, see? We might be a long time stuck in those trenches until Fritz gives up and goes home.”

I hated not having anything to do. Whilst I was proud of my psychic skills, I felt awful and useless just lying on my bed with so much activity going on around me. There was only so much writing in my diary that I could stand, since it was only me that was ever allowed to read it back. I watched as Idrys bounded to his bed, chucking his belongings into a drawstring knapsack as his eyes roved over his men. He towered over most of them, a protective man, laughing and taking the rip which his men were looking, but watchful and serious when their backs were turned.

“Oi, Reggie?”

I turned at the sound of my name. Billy was a fair-haired bloke with a cheeky smile and arching brows the shape of upside-down v’s. I blinked at him, and he gave me a thoughtful look.

“Couldn’t you tell us what the weather’s like out there?” he asked. “Only my Mam sent me these really thick socks, and I don’t know if it’s worth lugging them all that way.”

“Christ, Billy, he’s not a newscaster, you know,” Idrys chided. “Reggie’s not yur to do frivolous things like that for your entertainment. Get back to packing.”

“Yes, Lieutenant,” Billy said in a quieter tone, his grin dropping away.

“No, I’ll do it,” I said suddenly. The young man’s face brightened once more. I gave Idrys an apologetic shrug. “It’s not like I’m doing anything right now. A little trip to Belgium might be nice.”

In truth, I was rather excited by the prospect of Billy’s request. The Major had always asked me to visit the enemy and their war offices and, as yet, I had never had reason to send my mind to the battlefield itself. I knew by the maps in the Major’s office that we had men stationed all over Belgium and France, but the Western Front was somewhere my psychic eyes had not yet seen. I lay back on my bunk, closing my eyelids tightly to prepare for the journey. The sounds of the Foot Guards chattering and packing slowly began to fade away. I felt my body growing lighter as my mind disconnected from it, transporting me gradually across a black sea of nothingness that felt like the beginning of a dream.

I was certain that something had gone terribly wrong, because the first thing I heard was a deafening, thunderous bang. Flashes of brown and black shot past my vision that convinced me I must have simply fallen off my bed in the barracks, but after I tried to move, I realised that I didn’t have the

ability to do so. The hands in front of my eyes confirmed that I had successfully travelled to someone else's head, and they were hands coated in skin as black as coal. The man whose head I occupied spoke in French when he looked up, but I didn't miss the urgency and strain in his tone. His vision was obscured by mud and tears, which he began to wipe away with the mustard-coloured sleeve of his uniform.

So this was a trench. It was a deep furrow in the earth that was wet from an unseasonably damp autumn, and I was thankful that I couldn't smell whatever it was that was making my soldier's nose twitch violently every now and then. Another hideous bang went off overhead, its echo rolling like thunder, and my man dropped to the floor, covering his head with his thickset arms. Mud and debris flew everywhere, slapping him hard on the back with a heavy, wet slop. His gaze travelled down the length of the ditch in the ground, where I could make out six other figures huddled down in similar states of shock.

“What are they?”

A British voice rang out among the men. A mud-caked youth with a scar on his face raced up to my man, his face a picture of panic as he crouched in the dirt.

“What are they throwing at us, Abdul?” he urged. “I've never seen the like of it before!”

Abdul just shook his head as another explosion rocked the very earth beneath his feet. Flashes of white light were visible in the right-hand field of his vision. He turned my view away from them, edging closer to the British man as he wet his trembling lips to speak.

“*Incendiaire, Capitaine,*” he answered. “*Feu de l'enfer!*”

I had spent a lot of time learning German at the Major's request, and I reckoned that *feu* meant something like *feuer*, the German word for fire. The rest was easy to guess. Incendiary weapons. Fire from the inferno, which Abdul probably took to mean Hell. I hadn't realised that the French Africans were defending the homeland, too, but I felt the patriotic flame rise in the dark man's chest even as he quaked with fear. I was proud of his bravery. As the British captain patted him on the shoulder, I felt him smile.

“We'll be all right, Abdul,” the captain told him. “We'll wait it out 'til the fire dies.”

They didn't have long to wait. When the last echoes had faded, I watched through Abdul's eyes as he glanced into the clearing sky above. It was dull and grey from the recent fall of rain, with wisps of black smoke creeping across it like webs spun by a locomotive spider. The soldier and the captain panted heavily, two nations united by their patience as they let the tense, silent moments pass by. Soon, the British captain got to his feet and moved towards a ladder half-buried by mud in the wall. He shoved his feet onto the bottom rung and crept up the first step.

“Well,” he whispered, peeping over the muddy rise of the trench wall, “it looks like the barrage is at its end.”

Something small and bright suddenly flew past Abdul's vision. Before he could even glance at it, there was a terrible bang - a louder sound than I had ever heard in my life. In a matter of seconds, a huge flash of white light filled the trench, leaving me blind to whatever had caused the explosion.

wincing at the sudden burst of intense pain in Abdul's chest, a searing, white heat passing over every part of his skin, burning into his body with wild abandon.

Then, everything was dark. Abdul and the trench were gone.

"You all right, mate?"

I jumped, suddenly finding Idrys's shocking red hair in my vision. It took me a moment to clear my thoughts as I scrambled to sit up again on my bed. I clutched at my chest, relieved to find that I was still in Dover. I felt Idrys's hand on my shoulder, but I couldn't speak or even focus on his face for too long. My eyes flashed everywhere at once, as though I was expecting an explosive to drop into our safe little billet at any moment.

"Well?" asked Billy. I glanced at his hopeful grin. "What's it like out there?"

They were shipping out tomorrow for the trenches. I lunged forward on the bed, my stomach's contents suddenly leaping into my throat. The hot ache of vomit straining out of my insides made me shiver and shake. I couldn't hear what the men were saying, though I felt Idrys trying to hold me steady. Tomorrow, these men would be gone. Tomorrow, they'd be on their way to take Abdul's place. Was he dead? Had the captain and the others gone with him?

I didn't want to know the truth, but when my stomach was empty, my eyes closed of their own accord. My mind tried to reach Abdul again as I focused intensely on his dark, muddy hands.

Where Abdul's mind had once been, there was nothing to be found.

The trenches haunt my dreams now. I'm finding it hard to distinguish between the nightmares and the real visions that mix in my half-conscious mind. One moment, I think that I'm in the head of a trench soldier, running down the muddy divets in the middle of the night. The next, it feels like it's me who's on red alert, standing knee-deep in dirt and simply waiting for the earth to swallow the rest of me. The scene can change so quickly, from one of calm and waiting, to one of destruction and death. The soldiers die so often in my dreams that I'm surprised there's anyone left to see the next time my mind transports me to the front.

I tried to ask the Major General about it, but he just spouted the same thing that he told me before. Throw enough bodies at them, and the Germans will soon be running. I used to think 'bodies' meant strong fighters, sent to push the Krauts back with their bayonets. Now, I'm starting to wonder when he says 'bodies', the MG means exactly that - a pile of corpses so high the Germans can never climb it. If we keep letting our men die on the battlefield, perhaps the Kaiser's army will just get bored of killing them.

It makes me wonder if the same thing is happening on the Jerry side of the fight. Wondering a dangerous thing when you have a psychic ability, because it sparks a curiosity inside you that you know would be far too easy to fulfil. I shouldn't have looked into the other side of the trenches, but I did. The Germans were dragging their corpses back to their ditches, and the British and the French, for all our good graces, let them do so without shooting them in the back. How strange that we see fit to shoot a soldier that's been ordered to advance, but we won't take the lives of those in retreat. I'm struggling to see where, exactly, these lines of combat are drawn.

The enemy is the enemy, after all.

It was time to check on Idrys's family. He and the rest of the Foot Guards had been gone for four days, and I had checked in with them a few times on their way to Belgium. Usually, I found them resting in tents or other makeshift dwellings that the defending French and Belgian people had donated for the British Army's use. Idrys didn't much like the sound of my voice in his head but when we were alone, he was able to update me on the progress of their journey. They were scheduled to enter the rear trenches at Ypres on October the first, and nothing had managed to get in the way of that plan so far. I was determined to give Idrys good news of his family before he set foot in the hollowed-out earth that had haunted me ever since he left Dover.

The Major General was expecting me at two o'clock. He'd told me that he had special new orders for me, orders that would revolutionise my involvement in the war. I didn't much like the sound of that, but I pushed the concerns from my mind in order to concentrate on the task at hand. It was a quarter past one when I returned from the canteen to settle on my bunk and reach with my mind for North Wales. I was looking for a small village, as Idrys had described it, situated on a hill not far from the coast that led to Anglesey. It went by the name of Bryn Eira Bach. There was a farmhouse that Idrys's family had owned for generations, a large, white building called Ty Gwyn.

~~He had shown me a picture of his wife, Betty, a thirty-something lady with a chest as broad as her smile. She was buxom and jolly in her photograph, caught laughing as Idrys whispered something into her ear, his hand sweeping back her short, dark curls to do so. I saw her smile in my mind as I felt the rush of the psychic connection. Where a moment before there was only me, my bunk, and the sound of my heart in my ears, I suddenly heard the clatter of saucepans, and a black and white ha~~
came into view.

“Come on, you lot!” shouted Betty, smashing together a lead frying pan and a heavy, metal spoon. “*Cinio ar y bwrdd!* Lunch! It’s getting cold!”

The sound was deafening, loud as the roll of thunder, if it were right overhead. It made me marvel that whomever Betty was calling to hadn’t already come running. I almost considered leaving her consciousness again until she’d finished making such a racket. She was standing at the foot of a steep, black staircase, and soon the rumble of inhabitants upstairs mixed with the clanging of the frying pan. The first to emerge at the peak of the stairs was a young woman with thick, strong legs and taupe stockings.

“Oh, Mam!” she cried. “Cut that bloody noise out, will you? I’ve got a banging head, I have!”

Her mother countered her with a masterful brandish of the frying pan.

“Gladys, if you came for your lunch whilst it was still hot, I wouldn’t have to do this!”

Another two girls, slightly older than the first one, joined their sister on the stairs.

“We’re coming now!” one of them shouted. “Put the bloody pan down, woman!”

Betty erupted into a torrent of tellings-off as her three daughters descended the stairs. None of them could be described as skinny girls - they all bore their father’s height and their mother’s curves but they were possessed with a charming, Celtic beauty, all dark-haired and pale-skinned. Gladys, whom Idrys has told me was only sixteen, looked very much the grown-up woman with her curly bob of hair and smart clothes. She had some sort of badge sewn onto her blouse that told me she was working for a company called Jones and Mortimer.

I watched through Betty’s eyes as the three girls entered a long, wide kitchen, at the centre of which a great table was laid up with sandwiches and farm-baked treats. It gave me a pang of jealousy to see so much food, when I knew that my Mabel and little Gail would be suffering from the shortages we’d had up North since the war began. I supposed that farm folk would always be at an advantage when it came to rations. I wished for a moment that I could smell the delicious meat pie that Betty was slicing open in the centre of the table.

“I’m only trying to get you full up before you go to work,” she chided, her voice more soft than before.
time.

“I know that, Mam,” Gladys said with a nod, “but it’s my first day. I had to get dressed up. Mortimer’s very particular that I have to look smart.”

“You’re only serving in the local shop,” one of her sisters replied. “Who does he think is going

to come in? The Queen of Sheba?"

Gladys's rosy lips twisted into a scowl. "Shut up, Lizzie," she snapped. "You're only jealous because you got stuck outdoors all day handing out enlistment leaflets."

Lizzie was about to bite back, when her other sister lifted a hand.

"*Nawr te,*" she began, "Lizzie's job is vital. Our boys need to know all the information so they can sign up."

"Well said, Kathleen," Betty added. I saw her reach out to put a hand on the oldest girl's shoulder. "You two should listen to Kath more, she knows best."

Betty set about filling her girls' plates up with yet more food, but from the corner of her eye, I witnessed Kath's smug smile as her younger sisters pulled faces at her over their dishes. They began to eat, and Betty surveyed them with well-concealed enjoyment. A warm sense of pride overcame her chest.

"I wonder how many fellas you'll convince to enlist today, Lizzie," she mused merrily. "More brave bodies for the British Army, eh?"

The girls smiled, but I felt my own uneasiness returning as the psychic link faded away. They had no idea what the boys they were convincing had signed themselves up to, no comprehension of the bloodbath waiting in the trenches for those youngsters when they reached the front. There was a tightness in my chest as a horrible thought entered my mind. Would they change their minds about enlistment if Idrys never came back to them? No, it wasn't something I could consider. Idrys would get home to his family someday, so long as I was around to look out for him.

I shuffled on my bunk, trying to shake the unease out of my muscles as I refocused on the familiar target of Idrys's mind. I started for a moment when my vision turned black, but I could hear an engine rumbling somewhere nearby, so I knew that the Welshman had to be conscious. I felt as though the body I was in was moving, shifting from side to side against its will.

Oi Welshie, I whispered.

Idrys's eyes shot open, showing me the scene before him. He was in a dark, rickety truck facing the open back of the vehicle where a little dirt road showed the path he had been travelling along. Around him lay green fields that were absent of livestock, but the cloudy sky above was thick with long trails of black smoke. The smoke was drifting from somewhere ahead of the truck's destination. Idrys glanced behind him, showing me another dozen men from the Foot Guards dozing off in the truck behind him.

I suppose you can't talk, then, I mused.

He nodded ever so slightly.

I just wanted to tell you that I checked on Betty and your girls. Everything seems fine. Gladys has a new job in a shop.

My vision shifted awkwardly as Idrys rolled his eyes at the last part. I knew that plenty of men

didn't approve of their girls working during the war, but I'd never been one of them. My Mabel was a hard-working woman, and she always had been. If she hadn't been working in her father's laundry business all those years ago, then I would never have met her in the first place. Idrys twiddled his thumbs. He seemed to be waiting for me to go on.

Lizzie's handing out leaflets for enlistment, I continued. I don't know if you knew that. And they're all eating well. Your Missus seems like a cracking cook.

"She is."

He mouthed the words gently, but I could feel them well enough to know what they were.

How many days until you reach the trenches now? I asked him.

Idrys looked down into his khaki-coloured lap, where his hands were gathered. He raised his right hand, curving his finger and thumb to form a circular shape. It took me a moment to realise what the symbol was supposed to mean.

Zero? I asked him. *You mean, you're on your way there right now?*

The Welshman nodded a little again. There was a sinking feeling overwhelming me, though I wasn't sure if it was mine or Idrys's. Perhaps we were both thinking the same thought, the one that neither of us would dare say out loud.

Good luck mate, I thought, hoping that my voice wasn't shaking the way it seemed to be in my own head.

Idrys smiled. I felt the muscles pull on his face. They felt strained, as though he hadn't done much laughing since he'd departed from the safety of our little island.

I'll come back tomorrow, I promised him.

All I could hope was that he'd still be there when I did.

Having lingered in Wales and Belgium, I was late for the Major's meeting. When I seated myself in his splendid office, filled with pictures and medals of his own glory days, I couldn't help the prickles that formed little bumps on my skin. I remembered how I used to look at those walls with awe and envy. Now, every time I came close to them, they only made my flesh crawl at the thought of how many men in those pictures were no longer living.

"Well, young Reggie," the Major said. "Good tidings for you, my chap. I've been asked to extend your duties in the Covert Division."

The contented smile on his face did nothing to calm my nerves. I waited as patiently as I could manage, wondering what he could possibly mean by 'extending' my duties. I was already working an eight-hour day, dipping in and out of enemy minds to try and find valuable information. If they were planning on working me round the clock, my brain would be a puddle of muck by Christmas.

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