

Hunter

They called me the Hunter.

Once it was with pride, and I wore the name with pride. I was the best sniper in the platoon, then the best sniper in the company, then in the Regiment, and then they stopped counting, because it was not good to draw attention from Greater Powers, and that was what this was starting to look like.

Pride became envy, envy planted doubt, doubt bloomed into suspicion, and then suspicion gave way to fear. "Hunter" they continued to call me, but now in soft, low tones, with furtive hands clutching discreetly at objects of faith and superstition, accompanied by mutters of prayer and supplication.

They began to say that hands other than my own guided my rifle, pulled the trigger, sent the bullets singing home to their unerring marks. Even as I saved their lives over and over again, sniping machine-gunners and officers and all manner of defiant pickle-helmed Prussians, they said that I was accursed, a Jonah, a witch, that I had with powers not of this earth.

That I had made a deal with the devil.

Well, the truth was a little lower-ranked than that.

My brother was only a Private First Class, just as I was, when the rifle bullet punched through the side of his head and blew his brains out all over the trench. He had turned his head to look over at me, grinning the way he always did when he was about to tell a particularly good joke, his whole expression bursting to get out the punchline and start laughing. He was still grinning as he toppled to the floor of the trench, and he smiled at me from the stretcher as they took him away with practised efficiency, and made me sit down with a tot of brandy.

They say I needed it. I can't remember, to be honest.

The next day there was a big push in our part of the lines. Jerry caught us napping and the shells hit with half the company in the open. As the smoke cleared and the whistles blew in the distance and I was digging myself out of a collapsed bunker full of dead chaps, a pair of familiar, powerful hands seized my free arm and pulled me out of the dirt.

"Come on, James," said my brother, smiling and clapping me on the back to shake the worst of the mud off. "Stand to, that's a good lad."

"What do I do?"

My brother picked up a rifle from the bottom of the trench. "Keep your head down, point your rifle at the enemy, and shoot," he said, shoving the Lee-Enfield into my arms.

"But you're the shooter, not me," I said. I was the fisherman, he the hunter, it had always been so since we were ten. He took his first grouse at twelve; I would have been kicked out of the Army if the drill sergeants hadn't turned a blind eye to my abysmal marksmanship. He never missed a single shoot; I preferred to spend all my time wading in the trout-stream in the woods back Home.

"Let me worry about that."

I pressed myself into the mud at the lip of the trench as close as I could, and poked the rifle out front. John came right next to me, just like when he had coached me to shoot as young lads. He put his hand on my shoulder, pressed his bullet-ruined face next to mine, and laid his hand – the tips of his fingers already starting to turn green – on the barrel.

Shadows began to emerge from the smoke.

“There, that one, he’s blowing a whistle, that’s an officer.”

I pulled the trigger; the rifle kicked, and the shadow was gone. Then I did it again, and again, and again, until the attack broke down with all its leaders dead.

And on that day they started calling me the Hunter.

They sent me back to Regiment Headquarters, and gave me sandwiches and tea, and an officer interviewed me to ask me how I did it. I said truthfully, “My brother teaches me to shoot.” If he noted the use of present-tense, the officer said nothing. They sent me to sniper school, but John stayed in the trenches, and I barely hit a single target. So the officers shrugged and sent me back to my old platoon, although it was now full of new faces and only two or three of the old fellows who had gone through basic training with John and I were there... of course so was John.

He spoke less now, and half the flesh had fallen away, revealing dirty-white bone. The other half was red and green and black, but he didn’t smell and there were no insects crawling over him, unlike the other bodies lying unmoving on the battlefield.

“There. Machine-gunner,” he whispered, slurring slightly, as if he was drunk. His bony hand gently pressed the rifle barrel left. I could feel his right hand on my shoulder as always. It felt as hard and desiccated as his left hand looked.

I pulled the trigger, and another German machine-gun stopped spraying its lethal stream over the battlefield.

After another celebration of the Hunter’s prowess – a little more subdued and suspicious now, I noted – I lay in my dugout with a belly full of pilfered French blanc, bully beef and trench cake. My brother sat hunched on an ammunition box, his elbows on his knees, head down.

“John,” I asked him, “What are you doing here? Isn’t there someplace you need to be? Shouldn’t you be moving on?”

My brother look up and grinned at me through the ragged remains of lips. His eye sockets were empty now. “Don’t know.”

“What’s it like over there?”

“Cold.” He grinned. “Crowded.”

“With people?”

“Jerries. Frogs. Yanks. Us.”

I pictured a whole army of bullet-ridden soldiers wandering the trenches unseen around us, and stilled a shudder. “Why are you doing this?”

My brother grinned, his empty eyes drilling into my own. "Company."

I shot and killed through the summer and winter of '17 and into 1918 with John always by my side. The officers would tell us afterward that we had participated in grand battles named Ypres and Passchendale but all we ever really saw was endless days upon days of mud and blood and shelling, then a few days when all hell broke loose and we had to go up and over into the machine-guns and gas. Those few of us who survived could go back and wait in the rear till the trains brought fresh carriage-loads of young boys to fill out the ranks, and then it would all begin again.

The Hunter's tally kept going up, but now only a few dared to openly keep score, although I know they did in secret, furtive whispers exchanged after every skirmish. I was now a living legend, and a living curse, and the rest of the company avoided me even as they passed on the stories and the score to the newcomers, and died, and left the survivors to pass on the legend and die in their turn. Although there were supposed to be four men in my dugout, they always found excuses to billet with "their mates", and every night I was left to fall asleep in the dugout alone, my last sight always Johnny hunched in the corner, his elbows on his knees.

These days he said nothing now, merely pushed my rifle this way and that, nodded his flesh-stripped skull at new targets, patted my shoulder in a brotherly way when we were done. I in my turn said nearly as little to the rest of the platoon, and they spoke about as much to me. I slept a lot and ate little. Somewhere along the way my sense of taste deserted me and it became a mechanical chore. Sometimes I forgot to eat for days.

One cold February morning, the day dawned on a Jerry night patrol caught too far out in no-man's land by daybreak and stranded halfway between our trenches and theirs. The officers yelled for us to stand to, and it took every ounce of my strength to do so. John and I shot three men before the German artillery opened up and covered them with smoke and us with shells, and we ran back to our reinforced bunkers. My whole body ached with fatigue and I could hardly put one foot in front of the other, but no shrapnel touched me, and I went back to my dugout, and sat down, cradling my rifle.

My brother sat down opposite me.

I thought of lighting up a smoke, but as I fumbled in my pocket, the desire went away, and I let the cigarette fall from my listless fingers into the mud. My head was pounding, my hands shook slightly, and I looked through aching eyes at the silent uniformed skeleton sitting on the ammunition box. I thought of Home for the first time in weeks, of green grass and leaf-bedecked trees and the rushing chuckle of little woodland streams, and my thoughts were like a ray of sun bursting through overcast skies.

"Alright, John, that's enough," I said. "I've had enough of this war. I've sent a thousand men to Hell for you. I'm done."

My brother looked up, his skull now totally devoid of flesh, so he was forever grinning. He said nothing.

"I said I'm done. I'm too tired. Come on, let's end this. I've had enough of shooting. Let's go fishing in the woods like we used to."

My brother grinned ever wider, and nodded those empty sockets at me, as if telling me, *you know what to do*. He reached across with one bone hand, and patted me on the shoulder as he always did.

I smiled, and put the barrel of my rifle in my mouth.