

All's Fair

By: Ollie Gibson

February 9th: It was dark and rainy today on the field. Captain sent us to the lines anyway, and we fought bitterly until the final moments of the day. He's a reasonable fellow but far too removed. He's the eldest among our ranks; why he thinks the rest of us can keep up I can't imagine. But I respect him, nevertheless, he is a good man behind the stoic mask.

Henry, our main artilleryman, was wounded badly today and sent to the nurse for recovery. He'll be alright, but it hurt to see such a good man with such a brutal scrape. He was more worried about what his mother would think though; she always puts up such a fuss whenever he returns with a muddied uniform. We were partners in training once— I like the man's spirit. I hope he'll be back in action soon.

My squadron was starved half to death even before the battle. The Mistress refused us our field rations for the day for Frank's disorderly conduct the morning before, and the whole group suffered for it. I am not one for collective punishment, but I took it like a man, as the Captain insisted we all do. I refused to look Frank in the eye while we suited up, however, and requested to switch to the opposite side of him in the column.

February 10th: Our enemy grows stronger by the day. They've taken to calling us the "Greens", because of the vibrancy of the stink-bug infestation by our quarters. When the Captain turns his back, our troops have begun referring to our adversary as the "Pricklies", because of their mascot, a spiny googly-eyed sea urchin from our science book which they had ripped out, tacked to the top of their base, and named Franklin. Admittedly, it is a much less clever and well-crafted name, but still a biting comeback for their taunts and jeers.

February 13th: Over just a weekend, it seems the Pricklies have nearly doubled their stock of hand-held missiles, which seems nearly impossible during this time of the year. At lunch, I overheard Lucy and Madeline whispering by the water fountains outside the dining hall about something having to do with their artillery. With silent footsteps, I edged around the corner of the latrines to hear better and spotted Lucy just as she had glanced over her other shoulder and opened her purse to reveal nearly four dozen of them. *“From my grandma’s backyard– she’s got this massive oak tree and she let me collect the intact ones on the ground. Aren’t they fantastic?!”* she had hissed excitedly, and it almost made me sick to my stomach to listen to her speak so cheerfully. Lucy is outstanding on the field, and all our men know it. She can wield her infamous sickle made from soda can metal *and* her battle-axe at the same time, and she makes a perfect adversary for me and Jonas, the two main field fighters for our squadron.

Madeline was voted the High General of the Pricklies a few weeks back, because of her logical mind and courage, demonstrated specifically on the day she took on three fourth-year boys on her own and made one cry during our transport to the barracks. She is, in my opinion, the most intimidating person on the whole hostile party, and what she lacks in strength she constantly makes up for in surpassing nearly everyone on the field in her intelligence. Madeline’s quick tongue is far more biting than any bullet, and I avoid her at all costs outside of battle. On the field, however, there is no escape, and one’s only hope is to figure out the strategy she’s given her troops before they can enact it and take out entire lines of our men.

February 14th: Tomorrow’s skirmish does not seem favorable for us. Micheal ran the analytics almost five times in the back of his mathematics book for the Captain, but every time it ended in disaster. That’s most likely the cause of the Captain’s unpleasant mood during today’s transport

to the barracks, where I am writing this. At least, I'm hoping it's that and not the seeds of suspicion and in-fighting being sown among his men.

I am *not* disloyal to my leader or our cause, and anyone who says otherwise is a dissembling coward. But I am also loyal to my family and the friends I had before this war began, and one cannot penalize me for such a virtue. Liam is my main accuser, which I find to be somewhat hypocritical of him seeing as how he has hidden amongst the artillery 'reorganizing' the weaponry for the last four battles in a row. The subject in question is Madeline's right-hand woman, the second-highest officer on the enemy's team: Lily Guenevich. My next-door neighbor and childhood friend, I vowed I would not hurt her no matter the cost. This hadn't been a problem thus far; we had been positioned on opposite ends of the field and I had avoided her. That is, until today's fight, when my moment of weakness was witnessed by my peers and called out as soon as the bell was rung by the Mistress.

I had launched myself out of my squadron's trench and army-crawled to the nearest obstacle (which in this case was the weather-worn tree stump that sat near the abandoned training grounds) and hidden behind it waiting for my opponents to circle the other side. Two began moving past, and I leaped out to attack, just as I heard Lily's sharp shriek cut across the roaring din of the battle. I spun around, forgetting the enemies behind me, and saw that she had tripped in the uneven mud-slicked mulch of the high ropes course and now was surrounded by several of my fellows. I abandoned my post and rushed through the fighting to get to her, ignoring the piercing jabs in my back from the two I had tried to attack. As I ran mulch began to stick to my shoes, and I scrambled to stay on my feet. I finally broke through the circle of boys as they stood trying to decide whether to take her as hostage or not— she was the highest officer below Madeline and would fetch a high ransom. I shoved the closest two away from her and helped her

up from the ground. She dusted herself off, collected her weapons (dual-wielded daggers, which she could use so gracefully she was nicknamed the Swan of Death), and gave me a grateful glance before bursting out of the circle and retreating back to her battlements.

The battle had been lost quickly after that and we had returned to our trenches sorely beaten back, with all the blame landing on my head for the incident. I have a foreboding feeling welling up in my stomach for tomorrow, but I am not sure what is in store.

February 15th: All is lost, and worst of all, it seems to be entirely my fault. My loyalty to Lily has cost me my rank, my friends, and my cause— but it is worth it, of course, for I still have Lily.

Before today's battle, I received a morse-coded note from an anonymous source, which translated to a request for a meeting in No Man's Land before the day's battle began. (No Man's Land is the area just behind the battlefield, which is heavily littered and blocked off from view by a concrete wall.) I decided to take the risk and went at the time stated, making doubly sure no one saw as I moved away.

Lily was waiting for me, with something hidden in her hands behind her back. *"I wanted to thank you for your kindness during yesterday's battle. My people do not have enough resources for a hostage at this time, and I would have been trapped for some time if you had not saved me. It's not much, but take these as thanks,"* and she held out a bundle of wildflowers gathered from the field that morning. Small and beautiful, the white and yellow and purple blooms had been gently tied together by a grass blade into a petite bow. I took them and placed them inside the pocket of my dress shirt, then took her hand in mine. *"For you, Lily, I would fight the world. When I saw you in danger, I realized that I have been deceiving myself for a long time. You are much more important to me than this war. I vowed long ago that I—"* but I stopped when I heard a quiet clicking noise and the words died in my mouth. I jerked my head and

turned, ready to protect Lily with one hand out in front of her and the other still clasped in hers behind my back, and saw to my horror, Liam, standing there holding his little waterproof film camera in his hands. He smiled wide, like the devil himself, and spoke, *"You messed up."* He darted around the concrete wall and disappeared. I chased him around the wall but he was nowhere to be found. When I turned back to Lily, the look on her face made my stomach drop. *"I'm so sorry— I should go,"* and she ran off, unable to look me in the eyes. I was left alone in No Man's Land with only Lily's flowers in my shirt pocket as comfort.

I walked back to our camp, knowing the scene I was about to find but refusing to hang my head low as Liam wanted. When I arrived, the group was silent. Some wore expressions of anger, grief, and a few defensive, as if they could not believe it was true, it must be a mistake. The Captain sat on his tree stump, holding the camera in his hands. I stopped in front of him and was silent as he slowly looked up.

"Is this true? Are you fraternizing with our enemy?" He asked without anger, just a look of disappointment, and somehow that stung worse.

I cleared my throat and began to speak, *"Sir, it is."* The men around me gasped and the Captain shut his eyes as if refusing to let the information sink in. *"But that is not the whole story. Lily Guenevich has been my neighbor and friend for my entire life, and before this conflict began I vowed not to let her get hurt in the crossfire. I promise that this is all it is."*

The Captain stared hard at me, and finally spoke, *"Strip him of his rank."* I let out a breath as Henry stepped forward and took the pin off my shirt collar. *"I do not wish to see you back in my camp again, is that understood?"*

"Yes sir," I answered, staring him dead in the face, refusing to waver.

"You have been a good soldier for us, and I am sad to see you go. But this must be done to protect my men and uphold good conduct. I am sorry, Jack." he said, with a sad look in his eye that did not dare cross into his other features.

I saluted him, gathered my items, and left the camp, not daring to make eye contact with the men I have— *had* fought beside for so long. I returned to No Man's Land, planning to wait out the rest of the battle before we could go back inside and I could count the minutes till we were transported back to the barracks. I did not have many items with me, which was a frightening circumstance for being alone on empty wastelands. All the food was at the camps, and I had no access to it anymore. I just prayed I could scavenge my way through until I hit upon some village or club that might spare me some crackers.

A small noise shook me out of my thoughts, and I stood up abruptly from my spot against the wall, ready for a fight. But it was only Lily Guenevich. *"Lily,"* I spoke, not knowing what to say or do. I had lost everything, and she knew it. She ran forward before I could try to speak again and wrapped her arms around my waist, almost lifting me into the air with such a hug. I hugged her back, and after a few moments, we sat down side by side at the wall.

"It's all my fault-" "No it's not-" "I'm so sorry, Jack-" "Stop blaming yourself." I stopped her again and she fell silent. *"I vowed I would protect you, and I knew the consequences of such a vow when I made it."*

I looked up just as a silvery dewdrop fell from her shining eyes, and I wrapped my arm around her shoulder to try to comfort her. *"It's alright, I'll figure something out. But what about you? Why are you not with Madeline right now?"*

"I resigned. I figure I should be taking care of the people I love and care about, instead of fighting them." She looked away as she spoke those last words, and I opened my mouth in

surprise but said nothing. *“It was nice; it gave me a sense of purpose. But I don’t need it anymore, and I don’t think I want it anymore either, if this is what it means.”*

She looked up at me with her large, soulful eyes, leaned over, and swiftly kissed my cheek. I felt my face go red and I looked at her with wide eyes. She giggled and covered her mouth with her hands. *“Was that... okay?”* she asked, seeing my stunned look. I nodded slowly, and she stood up and held out her hand.

“Let’s go sit by the picnic tables and watch the battle,” she said, smiling brightly at me. I nodded again, and we walked, hand in hand, down the mulch path to the red tables. As we walked, it seemed that our camo-colored uniforms began to disintegrate, replaced with school uniforms— my dress shirt (still carrying her flowers) and trousers, and her blouse and gray skirt with black Mary Jane shoes. The pack on my shoulder was replaced with a small sack filled with sticks and leaves, which had so recently been my weapons and personal items I’d collected as souvenirs. Lucy seemed to feel the same, as she looked at the fields around us, noticing how the ground was not covered with bullets and tattered flags, but new spring grass, and the trees were not broken down and rotting, just budding with new leaves. I checked my shirt pocket as we sat down, and found that the beautiful wildflowers were simply clovers, dandelions, deadnettle, and violets. They were still beautiful, but in a different way, and I set them on the table for her to see as well. She smiled, and we continued holding hands and gazing up at the cloudy, blue sky until the bell was rung, reminding us that recess was over and it was time to go back inside for our afternoon class.