

A Regular Day in The Trenches

...as his legs buckled due to exhaustion, he stumbled his way back home. Every breath felt like inhaling flames. Inhale, exhale, inhale, exhale. No matter how painful breathing felt, the boy had to keep going, had to keep breathing. They were waiting for him. They were *all* waiting for him. Only he could help them. Only he wants to help them. As sweat merged with tears under the indents of his eyes, the boy kept going. He must keep going, he cannot afford rest.

Finally, home is in sight, but no one is there. Where are they? They are supposed to be here! He came all this way! Through pain in limb and pain in heart, he came all the way back. The promise he made to them kept him going all this time.

And yet.

The boy faces ten little graves. Ten little graves for ten little children, who had ten little dreams. And one boy to help those dreams come true.

But the boy is too late.

Martin Bell.

He broke his promise....

An alien sun rose to shine on an alien land. Martin Bell slowly opened his eyes to meet the light. Another night, another terrible dream. As Martin pushed aside his sheets, he felt they were drenched in sweat, as was his pillow. Released from their damp grip, Martin sat on his bed. The cool, alien morning air embraced his skin. Martin took a deep breath. With the exhale came along the fear he felt during his dreaming hours. If anyone knew about Martin's night terrors, they might ask questions, pick at patches of skin that are not yet wounds, yet are on the verge of tearing open. Martin can't have that. Martin has no time. He had a promise to keep. And in order to keep that promise, he had to work. And there's plenty of work in the trenches. All Martin needed was someone to show him the ropes.

As if on cue, a knock at the door. Martin realized he was still in his underwear and scrambled to get his uniform on. From the other end of the door, Billie could hear hurried footsteps going from wall to wall. Every stumble was punctuated by a somewhat apologetic, mostly panicked "I'm coming!" Then, a big thud. Another stumble, but this one was louder. Billie chose to assume Martin was dressed to the minimum

standards of common decency and opened the door. What she saw was a young man sitting on the floor. He rubbed the back of his head while sucking in air through gritted teeth. Martin's uniform was on, but the buttons were misaligned. His shoes were on correctly, but the laces were a few steps away from becoming dangling tripping hazards. Behind Martin, Billie saw sheets that were thoroughly thrashed about. And a half meter above Martin's bed, Billie saw an open window all fogged up. The chilly morning air probably clashed with all the body heat that still lingered in Martin's room. Billie could smell it too but felt it unnecessary to mention it out loud.

With all these strokes of information, Billie painted a picture of a man who sure as hell hadn't dreamt about anything fun. "Rough night?" she asked. Martin sheepishly looked up at his best friend and shook his head. "No, not at all. I'm okay. How did you sleep?" Billie could've pointed out all the evidence stating the contrary, but if a bad liar lies anyway, then that must mean they really want to hide something. Billie chose to let it rest. For now.

"I slept great! I mean, this place ain't exactly a five-star hotel or anything, but the beds are a lot softer than the ones we had back on Earth. Ready to meet up with Mari?" She asked the question while reaching for Martin's hand. His sweaty palm firmly grasped Billie's hand as he pulled himself up. "I sure am, Billie! Let's go make some money."

Outside the Barrack of Team Hum stood a patient Mari Fujitatsu. She carefully tucked away a strand of her jet-black hair. Her watch said it was exactly 8:30 in the morning. A little late to start a shift for most, but trainees always enjoyed a little leniency. Especially back in the day, when trainees had to cope with the fact they were essentially prisoners of labor on an alien world. This coping usually lasted only a couple days. Or weeks. Or months. Or years. Six thousand two hundred and seventy souls trapped inside the trenches. Some of them are coping better than you'd think. Most are doing as well as you'd expect. But all of them are trying their best.

Two pairs of footsteps approached Mari. She could hear the pace was quick, as those approaching her were in a hurry. Mari looked up and immediately had a frown on her face. Not because Billie and Martin were late. Again, trainees have leniency. But while Billie looked well enough, her uniform tidy and her firearm safely resting on her shoulder, Martin looked really disheveled.

"Good morning, Martin. Why are you so messy right now?" Mari asked. Martin stopped his stride. He looked at his jacket, his boots and then at Billie. He didn't say anything, but his eyes were practically asking Billie why he didn't tell him he looked this rough. Billie just shrugged and said, "Hey I would've helped, but we were in a hurry, bud."

Mari let out a deep sigh and walked over to Martin. "Come here, Martin," She said. "Let me help." Martin looked at Mari's hands as her fingers unbuttoned his jacket and properly tucked in his shirt. She then went on to button up the jacket the right way

and properly lace Martin's boots in a double knot. The speed at which Mari did this implied experience with caring for others. One could wonder why a girl looking this young was taught to care this much about those around her. But such questions are not so easily answered. And such answers might not be so easily heard. So, for now, let's focus on more timely questions, such as:

"Thanks for helping me, Mari! What're we gonna do now?"

Mari stood to face Martin and Billie while dusting off her hands.

"Today, my dear trainees, you two will follow me as we take a look at everything you can do for The Company. We will go over the different activities, let you do some light work, and most importantly, I will show you where you get lunch. Sounds good?"

Martin and Billie nodded to say that it indeed sounded good. The trio took a short hike to the frontline to start the tour in earnest.

Once there, Martin looked at the aftermath of yesterday's spectacle. Thousands of Greyhide bodies laid still beyond the trenches. Oil-like fluids had by now leaked out of most of the carcasses, painting the landscape with big strokes of black.

"Good thing those Greyhides don't rot. I don't wanna know what that could smell like," Billie said.

"Good thing indeed," Mari replied. "Anyway, I assume you already saw what happens during dinner time. That's basically the only moment of the day where you will see that much action. All other activities are much less explosive. Such as harvesting, the activity you're looking at now."

Mari gestured at the people walking amongst the Greyhide corpses outside the outermost trench. Martin and Billie saw how every cadaver was checked, tampered with and loaded onto floating carts. Mari resumed speaking.

"As you can see, our colleagues are picking up the bodies and checking in how good of a condition they are. Once the severity of damage is ascertained, it is logged into the system through a tablet your colleagues carry, and the bodies are put on the carts for the next process.

Billie slightly cocked her head as she studied the entire process.

"Yo Mari, I got a question."

"Of course, Billie, go ahead!"

"Ya just said the bodies are checked for how busted they are, right?"

"I mean, that is not how I said it, but yes, the extent of deterioration is checked per body."

Billie's head turned to Mari, mouth slightly ajar and one eye squinted shut.

"I don't wanna sound like an ass or nothin', but your colleagues used artillery, like actual explosives, to blast these puppers. If The Company needs those Greyhides, shouldn't we, like, *not* blow them to bits?" Mari snorted as she let out a small chuckle.

"The way you say things is funny, Billie."

Martin nodded in agreement, a big smile adorning his face. Mari continued.