To the Last Man

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THE REPLACEMENT

The British Lines, Near Ypres, Western Belgium-Autumn 1915

The darkness was complete, a slow march into a black, wet hell. He was the last man in the short column, one part of a line of twenty men, guided by the low sounds in front of him, soft thumps, boots on the sagging duckboards. There were voices, hard whispers, and, close to him, a hissing growl from the sergeant: "Keep together, you bloody laggards! No stopping!"

No one answered, no protests. Each man held himself tightly inside, the words of the sergeant swept aside by the voices in their own minds, a tight screaming fear, the only response they could have to this march into the black unknown.

They had come as so many had come, crossing the Channel on small steamers, filing through the chaos of the seaports, and after a few days, they had boarded the trains. There was singing, bands playing along the way, the raucous enthusiasm of young recruits. They had stared curiously at the French and Belgian countryside, returning the smiles of the people who greeted them at every stop, and few noticed that as the trains moved farther inland, closer to the vast desolation of the Western Front, the villagers were quieter, the faces more grim. Then the trains stopped, and the men were ordered out onto roads that had seen too much use, repaired and repaired again. They would march now only at night, hidden from the eyes in the air, the aeroplanes that sought out targets for German artillery. If the roads were bad, the small trails and pathways were worse, men stumbling in tight files, moving closer still to the front. The fire in the recruits was dampened now, by the weather, the ever-present mud, the soggy lowlands of Flanders. Then came the first sounds, low rumbles, louder as they marched forward. Even in the darkness, both sides threw a nightly artillery barrage at the other,

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some firing blind, some relying on the memory of the daytime, a brief glimpse of movement on the road, convoys of trucks and horse-drawn carts. Some had the range, knew every foot of the road that stretched out behind the enemy's lines. Throughout the night, the targets might be unseen, but they were there, and every man at every big gun knew that in the darkness, each road, each small path might be hiding great long lines of men, new recruits, the replacements who marched quietly to the front.

His guts were a twisted knot, his arms pulled to his sides, one hand tightly curled around his rifle, his eyes straining at the unseen man in front of him. The soft wood beneath him was bouncing now, sagging low, and his knees buckled, trying to match the rhythm of the footing. There were more soft sounds, splashes, the duckboards spread across some chasm of black water. His mind tried to focus, one foot in front of the other, keeping his boots on the narrow wooden boards. He imagined a great pond, inky and deep, the duckboards some kind of bridge, but the image was not complete, his mind shouting at him, to the front, focus to the front. The man in front of him made a low grunt, water splashing, the man stepping hard, trying to catch himself.

"Bloody hell!"

He stumbled as well, his boots down in the water, the duckboards sagging too low, and he felt the man suddenly beneath him. He fought for his balance, falling now, one hand pushing down hard on the man's back.

"Get off me, you bloody bastard!"

"Shut up, Greenie! On your feet!" It was the sergeant again, and rough hands grabbed his arm, jerking him upright. Beneath him, the other man pulled himself to his feet, both of them gripped hard by the sergeant.

"Stay awake! Keep moving!"

He wanted to whisper something to the man in front, an apology, but the march was on again, the rhythm of his boots blending with the others, soft sounds of water and wood. He felt the wetness in his socks now, the chill of the water adding to the cold hard stone in his chest.

The replacements had been called greenies from their first moment on the march, green troops, sent forward to rebuild the front-line units, fill the gaping holes in the British regiments. Their training had been rapid, some said far too rapid, a nation scrambling to find new soldiers, more soldiers than anyone had thought they would need. They had been parceled out into small squads by a system none of them understood, led by unfamiliar sergeants, hard, angry men who had done this work before, the men who knew the trails, who could find their way in the dark.

He had joined with many of his friends from the village, a small farming town near the Scottish border. No one had thought the army would be away from home through Christmas, but the newspapers spoke of great battles, a new horror for the world, words and places that seemed foreign and

fantastic. In the village, there had been talk of young men who would not come home, strangers mostly, sons of farmers barely known, word of families in mourning. His friends spoke of the adventure of it all, that if any of them missed it, or worse, avoided it, they would be called shirkers, traitors to the king. No matter the accounts in the newspapers, a massive and bloody war that had swallowed the whole of Europe, few who lived in the small village could resist the call, to march in song and parade to join a war the likes of which Britain had not seen since Napoleon.

He tried to adjust his massive backpack, the darkness broken by a small clink of metal, his canteen rattling against the trenching tool that hung down the side of his pack. He had become used to the weight, the clumsy mass just part of the rhythm of the march, bouncing with him on the duckboards.