

Spencer Wimmer

## The Light of Dawn

My father would wake me before dawn. I would dress in silence and go to the kitchen where my mother would have prepared a breakfast of honeyed porridge and rich black coffee. After eating in silence my father and I would stand in the pre-dawn light and smoke. One or the other of us would make some comment of little consequence and the other would grunt and shake his head either yay or nay. Then we would open the shop and start our day.

The day the letter came my father and I came home to find my mother sobbing, being consoled by the neighbor woman. She was staring at a slip of paper on the table like it would strike out at her at any moment. Ingrid, my sweet Ingrid, daughter of the neighbor woman was toiling over the stove. Her short golden hair was hidden behind a red kerchief. When I entered the room all eyes fell on me. There was a moment of silence before my mother broke free from the neighbor woman and folded me in a crushing embrace, her breath short and hot on my neck, her tears wetting my shirt. Ingrid looked at me with the most bitter sweet expression I had ever seen. My father read the letter, put a big warm hand on my shoulder and squeezed, and nodded. That night, as I lay awake I could hear my mother crying and praying to the Mother to protect her only son.

Two weeks later it was time to go. I rose from the bed as silently as I could. I stood there, not sure whether to wake Ingrid to say goodbye or just to go. I decide we had said enough farewells already. I leaned down and kissed her cheek, still salty from the previous night's sweat and tears. I lingered in the doorway, looking at her, memorizing ever curve and dimple, before finally leaving her to sleep.

The porridge that morning was sweeter, the coffee darker, than it had ever been. I embraced my mother one last time saying "I'll be back soon" and fought a losing battle to keep my eyes dry. Eventually, I was able to break away, and I stepped outside with my father.

We stood in the street in front of the shop, as we had innumerable times before. The cool morning air chilled my wet cheeks as I lit my pipe. Pale blue light only just illuminated us as we lit our pipes. The silence was not comfortable this time, it was oppressive, terrifying. I tried to alleviate the silence by saying things of no consequence, but my father merely gave the traditional grunt and nod. When the pipes had nearly burned out my father looked at me.

“Live for this, son. Live for every morning.”

His eyes were rimmed with red, his mouth downturned. I was in shock. My father never put more than three words together, and he was incapable of tears. Yet here they were. He extended his hand. I took it and shook hard. Then, I left, off to the recruiting depot.

They had come in the afternoon, marching in orderly lines, their orange jackets blazing like fire in the sun. They stepped out from the forest on the far side of the clearing from the bocage we huddled in. They came with such pride, such determination, their banners preternaturally flapping in the quite wind. The staccato of drums highlighted each concerted step.

They weren't like the images I had seen of them plastered on every street corner of my home. They weren't ape-men, dragging women by their hair to a terrible fate. They were not demons with orange glowing eyes, looking to devour my happy home. They were men, proud men, marching into the cannons mouth. Just as I was.

Then, the order was given for our field guns to be rolled up. Spaced evenly along our line they poked their muzzles through the thick leafy branches of the bocage. They were small, the iron barrel barely as large around as a man. *What good are these* I thought the first time I saw the fist sized balls of lead they fired. That day, in that field, I saw what good they were.

“*Kanun, aufence feher!*” came the order, screamed first by the company captains, then by the battery lieutenants, then by the gun sergeants. There was a great roar as all of the guns fired nearly in unison. The fist sized balls of lead ripped into the lines of orange jacketed men. In twos and threes, sometimes in a whole line of five the men fell like puppets whose strings had been cut. The screams of the orange jacketed men replaced the sound of thunder from the guns.

The orange jackets filled the gaps in their lines. The drummers, driven off beat by the guns, found their tempo again. The orange jackets recovered from the hammering of our guns just in time for another

salvo. By the fourth salvo they were irrecoverably in disarray, their lines were ragged, the drums all but silent. Not a man among did not have his own blood or that of the man next to him adorning his uniform. Then, it was my turn.

“*Burit!*”, the order came in its usual relayed manner. I waited to hear sergeant Holfstuder’s voice scream the order before I brought my rifle up and laid it across the lip of the trench.

“*Zeel!*”, I placed the front post of my rifle against the chest of an advancing orange coat, then brought my aim down to his crotch. It wasn’t an act of vindictiveness, it was training. The Zhuler Needle Rifle bucked quite a lot when fired, you had to aim low, or else the bullet would sail above your target’s head.

“*Feher!*”, I squeezed, did not pull, the trigger of my rifle. I felt the trigger click, heard the needle in the bolt slam forward, felt the terrible kick to my shoulder. The orange jacket fell to his knees, then to his face. I vomited.

“*Kneu luden!*”, with bleary eyes and trembling hands I pulled the bolt of my rifle back. Retrieving a fresh paper cartridge from the box slung on my shoulder I placed it into the breech and slammed the bolt forward.

“*Burit! Zeel! Feher! Kneu luden!*” The litany repeated itself again and again. Then the orange jackets began to turn back. First in small groups, then entire companies, then their entire line was running away. Many fired their rifled muskets as they turned, not wanting to run without at least letting us know what they thought of us. Their rifles were slow to reload, they took no time to aim, and our position was well covered, no bullet came close to hitting one of us.

Over the course of the night I slept not a wink. The screams of the wounded in the field steadily died away as did the men who made them. We ate our rations, dug our trench deeper, and slapped each other on the back.

“You did good, boy.” Sergeant Holfstuder dropped down beside me in the trench.

“*Daunk* sergeant.”

“And don’t worry about that” he pointed to the pool of dried vomit beside my fighting position “we all react different the first time we pull the trigger for real, and you kept shooting, the Warrior himself probably didn’t do much better his first time.”

He laughed and punch me on the shoulder, then he was off down the line to offer more words of congratulations.

“*Daunk* sergeant.”

Now, that same wan blue light that showed my father’s face now illuminated a very different scene. Looking out from the bocage, over the lip of the hastily dug trench I saw a scene that must surely resemble the fields in the depths of the underworld. In the clearing before me shapeless black forms lay scattered like so many discarded dolls. The vibrant green grass was marred by pools of red ochre, patches of burned grass, and deep divots.

I nibble on dry, hard bread sweetened by a small clay decanter of honey I had stashed in my pack. The smell of coffee wafts around me, brewed in mess tins over fires made from gathered brambles. The man next to me sharpened his bayonet on a whetstone, the blade softly scraping over the stone over and over again. Kluzer I think was his name. He had won big at cards in camp before we marched to battle. Now his cards lay scattered on the side of the road a few miles away. No man wanted to die with evidence of sin on his person.

“They will come again today” Kluzer said to no one in particular as he scraped away. I was the nearest person to him, so I decided to respond.

“Really? After what we did to them yesterday?”

“They will come again,” he repeated “the *arsklochen* won’t give up just like that. And this time it won’t be as easy, they will have brought up artillery and reinforcements in the night.”

I suddenly wasn’t hungry. I handed my bread to Kluzer which he took happily, and started cleaning my rifle for the fourth time since yesterday.

When the bombardment began there was no warning. I had just finished reassembling my rifle, ensuring there was a fresh needle in the bolt, a fresh cartridge in the chamber, and the safety on. The rising sun had begun to burn off the morning dew, and there was not a cloud in the sky. Yet, all at once the most horrific storm I could never have imagined began with a sudden, terrible fury.

Shells exploded above and in the trees all around, each creating an momentary orange fiery sun. The shells released hundreds of tiny balls and shards of white hot metal that rained down into the trench. I

buried myself as deep into the dirt as I could, making myself as small as possible. Bloody screams began to echo amongst the cacophony of exploding shells. I think I was screaming as well, but I could not be sure.

The shelling went on for ages, hundreds, thousands of shells it seemed. Surely when it was over there would not be a single tree standing or man living on this tiny strip of earth. I braced for the fragment that would cut me loose from this world. I hoped it wouldn't hurt too much. I prayed to the Mother that my family would carry on without me. I prayed to the Warrior that I would meet my death with dignity. I prayed to the Dancer to watch over my sweet Ingrid, and find her love once I was gone.

Then, as suddenly as it began, it ended. Silence. Not true silence, not the absence of noise, for the wounded still wailed all along the line. Instead it was like a soft, quite interlude after a great crescendo.

“They're coming, get your shit in the sock boys! Shake it off! This isn't over men, get up you bastard! Check your rifles and clear your positions! This day has just begun gentlemen!” Sergeant Holfstuder limped up and down the line. His right leg was covered in crimson, trousers torn to ribbons.

I pulled myself up against the lip of the trench. I did an inventory of myself, my cheeks were wet, my trousers soaked, my uniform had turned from blue-grey to brown in the dry dirt. But nothing hurt except my pride.

The bastards. They hid in their lines and bombed us, they turned us into minced meat at worst and terrified mewling children at best, while they had their breakfast. They would pay.

This time they emerged from the clearing in silence. No drums, their steps not in unison. They flew only one banner, a small red pennant. This time, there were many, many more of them.

“The Orhlam” I said to Kluzer, “the ancient war banner of their people, as long as it flies no quarter is to be asked, and none given”.

Kluzer remains silent.

The guns were rolled out again. “Kanun, *aufence feher!*” The guns roared once again, and again the orange jacketed men fell. This time their lines did not become ragged. Men stepped into the place of the fallen in an endless procession. It seemed there was no end to them. As they neared I could identify the glint on the end of their rifles. Their bayonets were fixed. The angry fire in my gut was quenched, leaving a cold hard ball of fear. They weren't going to run, they weren't going to stand and deliver volleys against our covered position, they were going to charge.

*"Ahguren shfert!"*, I slid the bayonet from its sheath at my side. It was a sword bayonet, resembling a small sabre, that can be wielded by itself as well as on the end of a rifle. Attached to a rifle it took much less finesse to use, though it was somewhat less effective. I slid the female grooves in the handle of the bayonet over the male grooves under the muzzle of my rifle. Then I waited as the orange jackets marched ever closer under the withering fire of the guns.

*"Burit!"*, and the cycle began. Ready, aim, fire, reload. I worked as a machine. Round after round, never missing a beat in the cycle despite the pit of fear in my gut growing as those men marched nearer. Soon the order was given *"feher freh!"*, every man fired as quickly as his fingers would work. I could feel a bruise on my shoulder growing with every painful shot, the pain was well worth putting as many of those bastards with murder in their eyes in the ground as possible.

They fell in droves, but marched on relentlessly. Finally, they reached mere feet from our line. Shouts were relayed down their line, and they stopped. Another order, their rifles were leveled, wicked steel coming to a point under the muzzle.

"Down! Down you bastards, down!" Sergeant Holfstuder screamed from somewhere down the line. I complied without question. There was another shout from their line and all of their rifles cracked at once. I could feel the impacts of the balls as they smacked into the ground before and behind our trench.

*"AHLANCHE! AHLANCHE!"* the word was repeated by a hundred voices up and down the orange coat line.

"On your feet and in their guts boys!" We shouted our battle cries and jumped over the lip of the trench to meet our enemy head on.

An orange coated man came straight for me. His rifle leveled at my chest, his eyes filled with fury, his voice carrying an ear-splitting shriek. I screamed back, leveled my rifle, and charged him. The space between us closed to inches in a second. He made a thrust with his rifle, I knocked it down and to the side, burying his blade in the dirt next to my feet. I pulled my rifle back, and thrust at his midriff. My thrust came to a sudden stop. There was a moment of shock as his shriek died on his lips. I pulled my rifle away, reversed it and struck the man in the head with the butt of my rifle. He fell, unmoving to the ground.

All around me there came the symphony of melee. Steel against steel. Blades cutting into flesh. The occasional shot of a rifle. Undulating war cries, and the horrifying shriek of gravely wounded men.

I thrust, parried, slashed, kicked, punched, I did everything in my power to kill, and by there doing, stay alive.

Then a shot rang out. Louder than I had heard yet, even on this day of cacophonous noise. A man in an orange jacket with golden epaulets stood before me with a smoking revolver. I looked down at myself. My shoulder was gushing with crimson.

*“Shuzeh.”*

The man with the revolver fired again. This time I felt it. My stomach exploded in agony. Then I began to feel the hot ball that sat in my shoulder as well. I doubled over. My world was suddenly reduced to a hideous scream coming from somewhere far off, and more pain than I thought any human being could experience. I fell to the ground clutching my stomach.

I opened my eyes, the man with the revolver was dead not far from me, his face resembling nothing so much as a poorly butchered hog. I open them again, there is Kluzer next to me, he isn't moving. His chest is open. Has he been like this the whole time? I open them again, there is that far off scream again as a white smocked woman digs in my gut for the ball.

I awake on a cot, a scratchy army issue blanket covering me. I throw it off and sit up. I am immediately made to regret my haste. White hot agony shoots through my entire body, emanating from my shoulder and stomach. I clutch my stomach to find thick white bandaging covering my midriff. I clench my teeth and swallow a scream, so as not to wake the other wounded men in the large tent around me. After what feels like an eternity the pain subsides enough for me to swing my legs over the cot.

A chill breeze is flowing from an open flap at one end of the tent. I follow the sliver of blue light the flap reveals. I step out into the morning twilight. The cool air flows over my sweat soaked body, it feels as if I slid into a pool of cold water on a hot summer day. Another wounded man is at the entrance, smoking. He offers me a stick of rolled tobacco, which I gratefully accept. I inhale as deeply as my ravaged body will allow, and let it out slowly, contentedly.

“Beautiful morning.” The other wounded man says. I nod in response.

“Glad I'm here to see it.”

I nod again, and grunt.