

## SAVIOUR

**BY LILY PERKINS (aged 15)**

Uhuru.

It was what we were all promised. But here we are, suffocated by the torturous mud and silence of the Somme. We are all consumed by querulous thoughts, but if we dared to voice them we'd be thrown out to No Man's Land, or as our Lieutenant threatens. My brother-in-arms was forced away too soon to fight his own battles in the safety of a hospital wing, my dearest mother's dementia worsened, and I stay solemn in the crevice of a trench at 6:25pm on the 16th of July 1916.

Sombre. Aphotic. An unshaken sense of ambiguity and a fear of what's absent... what's unknown.

"Gas incoming!" I hear a rattling shout from our Lieutenant.

In an instant, a sea of men stumbled to their masks, grasping at each other like desperate creatures clawing for prey. By the time I reached the rack however, all but one were gone; the only one left being tattered and worn. Looking back I realised I may have been too late, and as I braced myself for an inevitable torment, a strong force pushed me down to the clay below, grasping my wrists and forcing a piece of old rag to my face. I opened my eyes, and there, towering over me, was a fellow soldier. Androgynous at first glance, but with more defining male features. They, like the rest, wore a slightly tattered gas mask, but the area on the mask where one would usually see the wearer's eyes was foggy.

As I was about to shift away from the stranger, the dirty rag was replaced with a gas mask. Untattered and in good condition. Momentarily I closed my weary eyes, but the second I opened them again I realised the person was replaced by a thick clag of Chlorine Gas.

Days passed, the clods beneath us turning to earthly sludge. My mysterious saviour was nowhere to be found. I'd asked my friend about him, but he simply replied with a lowly grunt as he took another heavy puff from his cigar. We'd been on the edge of the Somme for many days now, sitting on soft piles of clay whilst we waited for hell to crash down on us. We'd bide one's time in purgatory, shuffling playing cards as our feet rotted away in

bulky steel-toed boots. It felt like aeons ago since the thundering of artillery shook our eardrums.

Our lieutenant came to us at midnight, bearing an order many men would simply shatter at the thought of.

We would have to cross No Man's Land.

We had all joked in the past that only a barbarian would make it across the field alive and in one piece. But our faces stayed sorrowful and pale for now.

"We'll charge at the break of dawn", he said.

I shuddered. 'The Germans would surely see us then, right?' I thought to myself.

Later, dawn came. There was no golden sun to greet us on such a bitter day, only the sea of grey that loomed over us.

No Man's Land was quiet; solemn; savage.

Until I took one wrong step.

It felt like the world was thundering around me. My ears felt like they were being ripped apart through the tumultuous boom of the landmine only several mere feet away.

But then *they* arrived. Grabbing hold of my trembling shoulders, my mysterious saviour dodged past the explosion, their grip as solid as iron.

"What are you-?" I spoke.

They did not answer. Instead they pointed towards the German trenches.

I looked away for a still moment, and yet again they vanished. The lieutenant gave a final order, and my mind went blank as my legs ran through the mud, my ears still ringing with a piercing shrill.

The 'Saviour' kept appearing for many days afterwards. They always materialised when I needed them, a familiar face amidst the violence, the grief, the hopelessness swirling like a pit in my ponderous heart.

I know my luck won't last.

We were closer to the Somme than ever before, its challenges hitting us in the form of dense foreign rain. The opponents were still and silent, hidden behind the dense trenches as we yet again trekked across No Man's Land.

One second, silence.

The next, open fire.

From left, right and centre I could feel the frightening rush of bullets. My heart skipped a hefty beat with each person that dropped to the ground.

My Saviour. They're here.

I stumbled clumsily towards them, my arms slightly raised outward. We stood facing each other, their gaze continual and strained.

I continued to look at them, disheartened.

And that's when it hit me.

They had moved to the side, just in time to let a spate of bullets pierce my body. My knees gave way as I gasped at the many wounds in my torso, and soon I fell on my back, the taste of salty blood filling my mouth.

But they just stared blankly. Not a single glimmer of sympathy left shining on the foggy lens of their gas mask.

I desperately called out for help in the form of a silent stream of tears, yet they were still deaf to my cries.

"Please..." I pleaded, "Don't let me go..."

Still, silent.

*"Ne me quitte pas..."*

The blood continued to flow. The world fell quiet. Hope faded into the bittersweetness of inevitable death.

I focus my attention back on them. They no longer glared sullenly at me, rather now they stared out onto the battlefield, their frame dissolving slightly behind the thick greyness of approaching smoke and soot.

*Their masked gaze on the horizon was still as alluring as ever.*

"Thank you..." I muttered quietly with a slight stammer, "Thank you for being there, there for me..."

I watched solemnly as their figure completely faded behind a soft welcoming light, a sort of warm presence from the heavens above.

I realised then and there that I'd found my true saviour.

My Uhuru.

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