

HEART BEETS

DECEMBER 2021

\$2

SPACE BUCKS

DO NOT, UNDER ANY CIRCUMSTANCES, SHARE THIS

Calling all Audionauts! Since the intergalactic ban on music, perpetrated by everyone's favorite bureaucrat, Lord Prosect, the infinite void has been eerily silent. In the before times, known as Before Music (or BM), music was distributed freely and fairly and pressed onto wax for everyone to spin. These tasty beats were thought lost forever after the attacks on July 6th, 5000 by Lord Prosect and his minions. Every radio station from the Andromeda to the Zymolytic Galaxy was assaulted, and cassettes, records, and CDs were disintegrated. If not for the brave Audionauts out there who smuggled what they could, the thumping rhythms and trilling arpeggios of the universe's greatest musicians might have been lost forever.

Before that attack, The Intergalactic Beats Project (then known as The Intergalactic Beats Project before the ban on the word "beat") was a major distributor of the music lost that day. After our headquarters was decimated, only two agents remained in operation.

We are those agents.

It has been millennia since the sounds of our artists have been heard, but every day we discover and decode the lost music that fueled generations to shake their hips and bang their heads. This Zine will track our progress as we travel through space and time to restore our entire catalog.

We need your help.

Our methods are unconventional, which means we lack the resources of the former IBP. We rely solely on your tips and scouting reports to track down everything lost in the fires and everything that has been secretly made since. If you are out there and your tasty beats need a home, send us a secure signal so that we may help distribute your music freely and fairly. We run the risk every

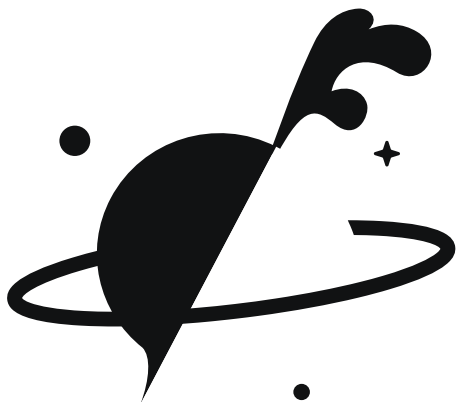
single day that we will be discovered and imprisoned, or worse...

Visit our telecommunications hub at INTERGALACTICBEETSPROJECT.COM and sign up to receive our monthly Zine, listen to our entire decoded discography, and join the fight against Lord Prosect. Together, we can bring an end to his tyrannical rule and restore music to the ears of all creatures in the universe.

In the words of our Neptunian supporters:



F31ix & Cyllene



HEART BEETS

Issue #5

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WHAT IS THE IBP?

The INTERGALACTIC BEETS PROJECT seeks out and decodes the tastiest beats in the universe, presses them to vinyl, and distributes them for all creatures to listen to. From 2021 until the year 5000, the IBP made a name for itself by making music free, easy to collect, and worth waiting for. After Lord Prosect banned all music on July 6th, 5000, it became our mission to save every last beat in the universe, rebuild our catalog, and make sure that the past is never forgotten.

The IBP does this as a free service, however, we encourage all Audionauts to support our mission in other ways: by purchasing merch from our Shop, signing up for our email newsletter, or by reading this very Zine! We have begun to repress our collection to vinyl and we hope that you'll stop by our telecommunications hub and pick up a copy.

Due to the constant threat of Lord Prosect, we take great caution in encrypting every communication, every item in our Shop, and every beat of every song. We have thwarted his silver hand and we will continue to do so for millennia to come.



WELCOME ABOARD!

INTERGALACTICBEETSPROJECT.COM

Much has been said, written, and broadcast about the unbelievable true story of Sad Dog. What we know is limited, and we've all heard the same story beats: after escaping from an intergalactic slave ring, the artist, who refuses to release her real name, was found in a dreary back alley, clutching a vinyl album; one that she had carried with her for almost a decade.

But before her rediscovery, before the midnight raid on the recording studio that plunged her back into obscurity, Sad Dog had vibrations of beats in her ears, her paws tapping the rhythm of dozens of tender compositions as she roamed the streets of cobblestone cities. She was given a modest contract to record several tracks for an EP that was to be titled *Stray Sonata*. The sessions were humming along at a modest clip, the executives eager to get the lead single out to radio stations and record shops.

Down & Out hit the airwaves in February of 4579, much to the delight of fellow creatures. She was on the fast track and the idea of an EP suddenly morphed into a double-album of guaranteed

bounce from planet to planet in service of mining, engineering, and manufacturing.

From those who claim they were there that fateful morning, the look on Sad Dog's face was only of confusion. She had no idea what awaited her. Given almost no time to run, she furious pawed at the one thing within her reach: a copy of her only single.

Then things started to get slippery.

Thrust to the furthest corners of the industrial universe, Sad Dog's bevy of unreleased songs simply sat. The recording studio changed hands, Mad Dog Shea was arrested and served time for the aforementioned crimes, but nobody seemed to care about Sad Dog, nor the hundreds more who had been torn from the material world by the gangster.

For nearly a decade, the warbled tones of *Down & Out* were all that we had to remember her by. Collectors fought for pristine copies and it became a hit on oldies stations.

Then things started to get interesting.

Electrician Torca Cereboni was attending to a

STRAY SONATA AND THE HOWL OF SAD DOG

hits. A whirlwind ensued, and late nights behind a synthesizer began to take its toll on the young artist. She resisted the temptations of her fellow beatmakers and put her soul into finishing her 16-track masterpiece.

Then things started to get complicated.

A fur-laden bandit had come to collect his lion's share. Like many young artists, Sad Dog had not properly read her contract, entrapping her in a deadly game that meant she would have to deliver on time, and with many Space Bucks, or be turned over to the executor of her musical estate: Mad Dog Shea.

A ruthless ruffian among a sea of thieves, Mad Dog Shea proved to have staying power, dipping his paws into many different ventures, including racketeering, interspace theft, and his pet project: musical prodigies. Hoping to go legitimate, in his words, he had signed a bevy of artists to unfair contracts, and when the artist inevitably could not deliver, they were sold into a slave ring, forced to

downed powerline at the edge of the city of Neos Canis when he spotted something at the end of an alleyway. Rain had poured in from a lingering storm that had ravaged the coast for more than a week, and the winds were finally starting to make landfall. As lightning struck ferociously, he stumbled past trashcans and sparkling telecommunications wiring to reach the huddled mass. His attempt to comfort the creature was met with shivering and squeaking. All he could make out in the flashes of lighting was a vinyl record.

The homeless shelter refused to take her, the soup kitchens chased her with spoons, even the social services office locked its doors. The city was teeming with others in the same situation and dared not intervene. Torca, by his own admission, was skeptical about taking in the homeless stray, but his wife insisted.

Warm and dry, finally, it would take Sad Dog time to not only come to terms with what had happened but to tell the story in full.

Then things started to get hopeful.

With no knowledge of her past work, Sad Dog's pleas for help went unnoticed. Her new host family admired her intelligence and companionship, but they were worried she would end up roaming the universe again, clutching her soiled record. So they put her in touch with Torca's brother, who had had a mildly successful career nearly 50 years prior as part of a two-man act known as the Martian Transit Authority.

Former subway conductor Gelli Cereboni had conducted more than just the opening and closing of the automated doors of his beloved train. Along with his station manager, they moonlighted as a beat-making duo responsible for the 4532 hit *Express Yourself*. Mild success meant he had connections, and boy did those connections pay off.

Brought before the Intergalactic Beets Project, the possibility of not only releasing long-lost material but putting Sad Dog back in her place was too tempting to pass up. Our financing provided her studio time, as much as she needed, and the safety which would allow her material, new and old, to flow in time.

Then things started to get frightening.

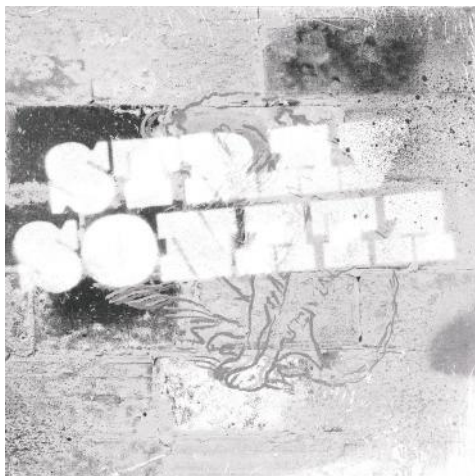
What we had not prepared for, Audionauts, was that Mad Dog Shea, who we all assumed was still rotting in prison, had commuted his own sentence, using his roving gang of loyalists to bust him out of his solitary confinement.

Their first stop? Well, I guess you can figure that one out on your own.

Only a week had passed before our studios were assaulted and young Sad Dog was wrapped in his evil clutches once more. Our efforts to locate her have turned up nothing but stale crumbs. In an effort to locate our dear friend, we are releasing a brand new single, the title track of her unreleased double album *Stray Sonata*. Use this song, fellow Audionauts, to spread her unique voice across the universe so that we do not forget her, so that we leave no stone unturned. If you have any information that will lead to her return, please send us a signal immediately.



Scan me to listen!



STRAY SONATA

SIDE A

1. Down & Out
2. Begging
3. Reference Check
4. Alleyway Blues

SIDE B

1. Stray Sonata
2. Lap It Up
3. Little Body, Big Attitude
4. Shake/Shake/Shake

SIDE C

1. Lick It Up
2. Storm Brewin'
3. The Big Sleep
4. Cat Scan

SIDE D

1. Fireside
2. No Kill
3. Only Throw
4. Muzzled

BEAT OF THE MONTH

"STAND CLEAR OF THE CLOSING DOORS, please!" This refrain was repeated every sixty seconds over the loudspeakers of Martian Underground Subway Kinetic System (MUSKS). One of the most efficient transportation systems in the universe, everyone who rode the shiny silver tubes could cross the entire planet in under thirty minutes. So fast was the MUSKS that workers started to complain that they were always on time! Profits were up! Output was up!

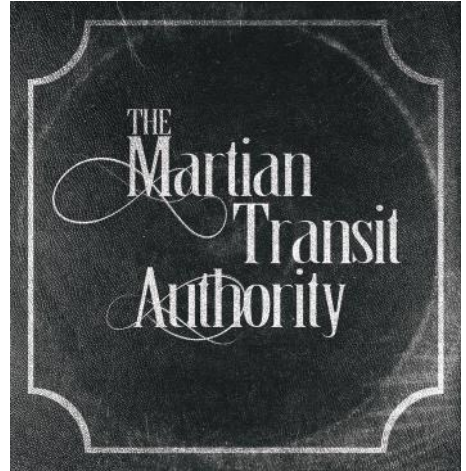
With corporations breathing down the neck of the Martian Transit Authority (MTA) and forcing the subways to run even MORE efficiently, the workers decided to put a stop to the backbreaking hours and the harsh working conditions.

Enter Gelli Cereboni, a humble conductor on the Yellow Line. His job was to direct the train, open and close the doors, and make sure nobody lost a limb. What his supervisors did not know, is that Gelli moonlighted as a beatmaker along with his station manager Bricknack of Zarg.

Their rebellious sonic attack pumped their funky, toe-tapping beats through the loudspeakers, preventing workers from entering and exiting. The trance they were in meant business slowed to an Earth-like trickle.

The victory was short-lived, and a wave of redundancies swept across The Martian Transit Authority, including Gelli and Bricknack's untimely firing. While new conductors and managers flooded the nearly two thousand stations nestled across the Red Planet, a record contract was being signed in secret.

Taking the name of their former employers, the duo burst onto the scene in 3579 with their self-titled debut, serving up a tasty beat in their lead single *Express Yourself*. However, a lawsuit, alleging theft over their name, bankrupted the duo (they fought hard to keep it) and they mostly faded into obscurity. The impact of that record, though, sparked a wave of transit-inspired groups, including the Neptunian Electric Bus Gang and Centauri Cyclist Conclave.



The Martian Transit Authority

SIDE A

1. Express Yourself
2. Stand Clear!
3. Next Stop, Phobos
4. Showtime!

SIDE B

1. 30 Minutes Over Mars
2. Roy G. Biv & Friends



Scan me to listen!

FRIENDS OF INTERGALACTIC BEETS

VISIT INTERGALACTICBEETSPROJECT.COM/FRIENDSOFIBP FOR MORE INFO!

HAMTRAMCK IS THE WORLD IN TWO SQUARE MILES

-THE REAL FROM MY CITY-

TOEHEADS - seeing a Toeheads show live is like being shot out of a cannon. The band is Joey on bass, Jake on guitar/vocals and Derek behind the kit. The band formed only a few years ago and is one of the most entertaining young garage bands to hit the Motor City in at least two decades. With clear influence from John Dwyers "The Coachwhips," these boys are a force to reckon with. Out of all the local shows we've seen, Toeheads get the coolest crowd. Whether its because the up-north hipsters don't know yet, or because they're scared of the pit, Toeheads are still on the underground tip. The shows get wild, sweaty sexy freaks throwing down on the floor; a freakiness that wouldn't exist here without them. They make everyone do the pogo into one another like a bunch of popcorn in the mic. The Outer Limits Lounge in the Detroit Neighborhood of Hamtramck is home turf, but they'll be setting out on a southern tour this December with The Stools. Yowza!



208 - a two piece garage punk onslaught, with a new single out (*Red Cat* on Remove Records). Paying homage to fellow Michigan punks Iggy and The Stooges, they've been known to cover *TV Eye* and *I Wanna Be You're Dog*, two punk classics bred from the dirt of the same city they walk. The band's first song *Into the Dark* had everyone wanting more since it's arrival last summer. 208 is one of the loudest two piece bands ever, with nasty thrashy guitar riffs and hypnotic schizoid drums. You don't wanna mess with Kyle and Shelby, they'll eat ya for breakfast!

THE STOOLS - probably Detroit's most eclectic three-piece blues punk band, they've together for about five years. The Stools are the forefathers of the newest punk scene in town. They've been playing a lot around Detroit in the past few years, always melting faces. Unlike Toeheads, the Stools find more of an enclave of fans from all walks of life, most likely due to massive local popularity (the bores from the burbs even need a little taste). With a single from Jack White's Third Man Records under their belt, who knows what will happen next, but our guess is a killer album and a world tour. Chuck (drums), Krystian (guitar, vocals) and Will (guitar, vocals) set out on a mini south tour with Toeheads this December. Catch 'em if ya can. They'll be in Nashville, Memphis and Louisville!



ZILCHED - a full band fronted by singer/songwriter/guitarist Chloe Drallos; one of the most unique artists we've seen come out of the city in the past few years. It's hard to have such a wonderful voice and not sell out, at least we would think so. Chloe makes shoegazy rock with a hint of 90s grunge, drawing influence from music like The Jesus and Mary Chain, Hole, Nirvana, The Cure, and Madonna. A true artist, her material unapologetically personal, conveys a realness in her music that is addicting, along with melodies so catchy you'll be trying to figure out how it got stuck in your

head so fast. With looks that could kill, Zilched has it all. Check out their *Pulling Teeth* EP and their latest, their debut full-length album, that was recently pressed on vinyl: *DOOM POP*.

STORY TIME

THE HUNT IS ON

*On December 20th, Running Dog Nebula will celebrate the 1000th anniversary of their debut album **Dogs of War**, which featured songs dedicated to Earth's 20th Century World War I conflict. To commemorate this occasion, they have released a short story that inspired the lead single from the album, **Even A Dog Enlists**. We are proud to present this short story, which shares the same name, in its entirety, with permission.*

Its consistency never solidified, wavering relentlessly between sickening brews of thin black liquid and viscous grot. The skies endeavored to ensure the unpredictability, belting nearly-acidic sheets of rain in day-long shifts, clearing momentarily before reloading and ejecting another insufferable round. The boot tracks made days prior were washed over by new ones before the tide of mud undulated and smeared them into obscurity. It was for the best, the grateful dead had been dragged from the battlefield to opposing ends, accounted for, tagged, and shipped to the field hospitals kilometers behind the front.

The trenches hummed with clouds of white vapor, some stretching infinitely, the others puffing in short, anxious spurts. The vacuous *pop* of the muck signaled patrols, the officers trudging up and down the line, offering their meager pittance of appreciation with nothing to show for it, not even an extra tear of stale bread. Mocking the routine appeared to be forbidden, the enemy mimicking the effort, a slap against the shoulders to remind them they were all brothers.

The battlefield had once been a prideful meadow, the surrounding forest now plucked of every available stalk. Nothing was left to remind anyone of its former purpose, not a single blade of grass. Every millimeter of earth was churned by hoof and boot, uprooted by mortar and shell. Dwellings were obliterated, the very bricks crushed into a fine powder. What had once been hills were flattened, the remainder pounded until a desert developed. Black and white fought for supremacy, the uniforms of both contestants, smeared in the mixture the rain had wrought, the stains of comrades' blood just as dark, just as crusted.

The incessant droplets pelted his field pack, soaking into the burlap until it slowly buried him in the dirt. Upon the insistence of his commanding officer, he had accepted a meager patrol, shifting slowly along the ground in the middle of the night, choking on the backwash of the rain. Leaving the confines of the trenches was as equal as remaining so. A hundred meters from the exit tunnel, he had encountered a mound of thorns, the remnants of an overturned cart providing a tasty vantage point. A handkerchief soaked in urine was draped over his mouth, protecting him from the ghastly mist of

putrid gas and the emanations of the deceased horse that had fallen as a result of the gutted cart. Here, in the weeds, he and his spotter had waited.

The change in elevation gave him precedent, the angle affording him brief performances of the peaks of the enemy's martensitic silicon and nickel steel helmets. A headshot would have been inconceivable, the thickness and durability challenging to puncture through. He would have to triangulate, wait for them to lift the heavy burden and scratch their noses, massage the baggage under their eyes. He would thread the bullet against the cartilage, the force enough to tear the back of the throat and clip the spine. Even if their indexes had lovingly caressed the trigger as a matter of reflex, a paralysis would have already prevented them from squeezing; no chance for a lucky return strike.

Patience allowed him, however, to prevent such a luxurious kill from being wasted. Time, and the weather, introduced a temporary stalemate, neither side finding the strength to march to the lip of their trench and blast their native tongue into the air. Prideful howling bubbled from the network he had left behind, a small flame casting shadows along the uneven trench walls of the men who claimed to belong to his pack. They delighted in a warm can of processed beans, their steel spoons *clanking* off the edge.

"Still hasn't moved." He lacked the discipline to remove his eye from the lens of the magnifier to wipe clean the dry sensation. His crosshairs remained fixed upon the trench. Not the front line; tucked behind it, where the tips of vulnerable ladders led to clandestine troughs. A cutout had been excavated, a shallow chamber built. The port was rung with jagged kindling to prevent its collapse. His target, though, did not perch upon the frame, preferring to lay upon his belly, his rifle tucked from view.

In the amplification of his scope, the sharpshooter studied a featureless, medieval mask. He suspected the face of a wood stove had been ripped at the hinges, heated unimaginably, and flattened. Five leather straps were adhered to the edges, knotted together at the back to fasten the black sheet to the head. The visage bore no discernible markings, beyond the scattershot

scratches of near-misses, save for two cutouts, no larger than thumbnails. From this distance, and precocious angle, it was impossible to imagine the bloodthirsty stare.

The hidden Gewehr 98 exploded, the iron mask unflappable. Smoke from the barrel stumbled through the port as the intended target dropped. When on the receiving end, the first indication is always muffled, the unsure expulsion of a single firecracker. The second note groans much louder, like a knife through fresh fruit. The victim was unable to receive a warning, his neck peeling open, backed by a pressurized spray of black. He had taken shelter beneath an unsteady, wooden bridgeway, a cigarette dangling from his lips.

His peers dove into the slop, covering their own heads with leather gloves and callused hands. There would be no laughter for the remainder of the day, perhaps not even the relief of their sleeve to wipe their brow. The bleeding head slapped the dirt wall and he tucked himself into an awkward crouching position. A snoring rattle came in shortening intervals until his heart succumbed to exhaustion. His trousers darkened at the insistence of his bladder.

The successful kill was registered promptly. From the enemy trench came a rudimentary pole, its hooked end shepherding a small, handmade imitation flag of the Canadian Red Ensign. It was fastened to a crucifix impaled with carpentry nails, each peg carrying the confirmed kill of participants from the United States, Britain, France, and others. This had been the fifth Canadian vanquished by the patient sharpshooter, all under the banner of the Iron Cross.

"Bastard. *Maji-manidoo*," he seethed, his sloppy index finger dripping with sweat and rain runoff. If he were to strike, it would be only against the rigid metal, there would be no element of success. "The Hun won't move. *He won't fucking move.*" He needed reassurance, he required his spotter. "He's got to make water at some point, eh?"

The corpse beside him bore the same uniform, the same ugly chocolate tint. The emblem of the 107th Battalion Expeditionary Force was pinned to his chest, the growling, mid-stride timber wolf meant to elicit fear in the German devils. He lay in the open, beside the capsized cart, his helmet removed along with a portion of his skull. The bullet had removed the fleshy pink interior, carving out a bowl in which blood, rain, and the nuisance of steel blue flies, could germinate. His eyelids were pinned to his skull, the aperture of his irises expanding until they rung the pupil like the stains of a coffee cup. He had not been disarmed, his weapon snug against his chest, his field pack preventing him from laying straight. To the heavens, he stared, unblinking.

Here, in the weeds, he and the sharpshooter had waited. As dawn broke on the first morning, their reconnaissance had proved naïve, his vantage immediately struck down by the Hun with a well-placed round. Believing him to be a lone

hunter, the enemy had not returned his barrel to the innocuous resting place of the malnourished horse and its wares.

This was the only consolation, the only advantage.

"What if I pick off the weaker ones?" he suggested to the deceased. "Pepper their goddamn heads until I draw him?" He contemplated the strategy, quickly thinking better of it. "You're right," he sighed. "*Keep him comfortable.*"

Who was this knight? What possessed him to nestle behind his battlements and strike fear into the Canadian pack? The chariots of his trigger drew no distinction between acquaintance or brother; they were designated to kill because it was decreed. Fists banged, and throats ran hoarse with protest in the Motherland; therefore, his chamber was stocked, flush with enough cartridges to bless him into retirement. He needed no rest, nor nourishment, a creature designed to snuff the light solely at the point of a finger, the whisper of a syllable. He was a reaper born to thresh, his mind incapable of understanding the calamity of death, the incongruous moment before the candle was blown clean, the rapid dissemination of every moment washing across the eyes of the fallen before darkness intervened. The Hun was careless, unkind, unwilling to understand.

Through the lens of his rifle, he watched the unflappable German, grinding his teeth until he swallowed the thin shavings of enamel.

An unexpected approach shifted his weapon, a charging gray and white menace bursting through the thorns. He was wrestled backward in the flapping entrance, his rifle nearly discharging. Rolling into the corpse, he waited for a gunshot, waited for the swift black curtain to collapse upon him.

The gentle cooing of a newborn shifted his neck, his head craning toward the uncertain perch of a carrier pigeon. Relief was injected into his stiffened muscles, his cheek slapping the cold mud. He kept his eyes fixated through the weeds, making sure his movements could not be detected. A hollowed cylinder attached to the avian's black legs held information; the hinged casing *popped* and the message was retrieved.

Barrett, you nitchie. Hopping over the bags. Winnipeg. Theme.

It was addressed to him. He struggled to remember the updated trench code he had been given the prior week. *Winnipeg. W. Wednesday. Theme.* Five or six, he could not be sure. *Hopping over the bags* indicated a charge. No telling the extent of the offensive, whether flyboys from Britain would be engaging the Germans first. He wrenched back the sleeve of his overcoat and examined his watch. Nearly seven in the evening. Was it Tuesday? *Monday, perhaps?* Initiative always came at first light, too much confusion in the dark.

"Shoo. *Shoo!*" Barrett whispered, flicking the bird into the waning light. He crumpled the note and buried it in the mire. He maneuvered

his elbows until he could boost himself back into position, his rifle's barrel sneaking through the thorns. The German had not moved, though the silly fingers of his allies pointed out the fluttering pigeon's wings. A handgun erupted, along with a bevy of accented laughter as they tried to down the messenger. "*Nitchie*," he grunted. "Grandfather would have ripped the mustaches off their faces for talk like that. You would have too had you not gone and done a stupid thing such as that. It's bad enough our mother engraved us with Christian names, you would think they would take it easy on us." The pelting rhythm of the rain allowed the silence to answer. "I know." A sigh accompanied the slight defeat. "Jeremiah, *I know goddamnit*."

The embroidered patch of the corpse matched his. *Barrett*. His flesh kept a similar tone, a shade darker than his compatriots tucked between layers of shoveled dirt, enough to be plucked from a regimental photograph with ease. "I was always the pacifist, but, somehow, it was *our* people who showed up at the enlistment office. We were not the ones with tears in our eyes, eh? *No*," he scoffed, "it was the whites, the cream-colored frogs that hissed at us on the street. *Lapdogs*, all of them." He foolishly left the comfort of his mounted scope to stare at his brother's death mask. "And I suppose they are to blame? You are cut from the same cloth. You and the brutes on father's side. You blame only yourselves, and you crush your fists and swing." A shudder seized his throat, his voice *cracking*. "I'm sick of it. I will no longer shoulder your mistakes! You think you can protect everyone. You think you can reach out and shield the world with your chest." He meant to scream it into the depths of the German line, but he held his zeal, keeping his tone hushed. "*You...*" Saltwater danced to the outer edges of his eyes, the deluge in waiting ready to push the combatants to the sharp curves of his cheek. "You wanted this. You *fucking...warrior*. You turn your knuckles over each and every time and-and *now* is when you want to curl your fist? Bagwanawizi... bagwanawizi! You stuck your goddamn head out, for this? *For this!* You were supposed to take care of me. Who the *fuck* is going to do that now, eh? I've got to carry your bloated ass around this muck now? *Forever!* You bastard. I'm going to kill you. *I'm going to kill you.*"

Barrett returned his index to the smooth trigger, his crosshairs *snapping* to the Hun's protective-

Night had fallen, a disturbing pitch that masked kilometer after kilometer in secrecy. Somewhere along the German line, a massive bonfire had been erected, yet no one bothered to seek its warmth. He panicked, the stock of his rifle digging into his bruising shoulder. He tittered about, shifting the barrel this way and that. His lungs called for purity, but he was allowed only staccato exhales, the intake not enough to satisfy the request. He had lost the advantage, hours now to wait for the exchange of light, the charge to come when the sun yawned over the horizon.

An unsettling wail rang out from beyond the

flames. Whether it was of an English bent, it was impossible to decipher. The serrated edge of a blade was used to manipulate the lone howl, the depth and intensity keeping the tortured on edge. Barrett struggled to the overturned cart and draped the barrel over the moist wood. A gouged structure on the outskirts of the bonfire's throw disclosed only shadows, the clarity, however, revealing the fire's origin. The French had abandoned a tank in the middle of a plowed stretch, its exterior flickering from the ignition of its gasoline reserves.

He watched the ritual dance of the flames, their dictation governed by the tepid breeze that limped across the battlefield. The mouth of a Maschinengewehr 08 suddenly burst into the light, the emplaced machine gun hoisted by two trotting Huns and a third lagging behind, cradling an armful of ammunition. Barrett would not be able to squeeze a round off cleanly as they disappeared into the darkness, hurrying for the trenches.

Returning to the weeds, he settled on his original vantage, keeping his crosshairs in the vicinity of the sniper. Despite the rain's drumbeat, the rattling of the belt-fed cartridges tickled his ear. He repositioned himself, shimmying his belly. There would be no reflections in the thickness, only his intuition. Perhaps he had fooled his instincts, believing himself to be an excellent hunter on account of his ancestors, their foraging sustaining them for generations until the arrival of the clothed and musket-baring. His blood boiled with their ancient experience, his eyes focused upon the spirits of the damned. He would be able to see the orange and yellow glow of their hellish souls, shaped like the hounds of some Christian afterlife.

No such powers were granted.

The sizzling birth of a match began with a strike against the red phosphorous patch on the exterior of the booklet. The friction peeled the head and ignited the oxidizing agent, creating a miniature blaze. A disembodied hand appeared, its lean pulled up to the tip of a priming cigarette. Barrett fixated on the glow, dragging his crosshairs to the inhalation. But the match would not be extinguished. It bowed forward, lighting the adjacent relaxant. *Two now*. A bit left in the wick, the third having a spot of trouble lighting the tobacco. Judging by the angle, he had locked onto the profile of the smoking Hun. Just a bit to the right, underneath the lip of the helmet's ear flap.

This would not be a declaration of war, merely a message to the hidden sharpshooter. Barrett engaged the trigger, the weeds before him shivering from the blast of heat and light.

The delightful *pop* of the German's skull elicited the drop of the burning match. It fizzled in the muck, the retaliation commencing as the two machine gunners opened the Maschinengewehr and sprayed the night with orange and yellow tracers. Just as the forbidden match had drawn the native's ire, so did his muzzle's eruption lure the Hun. From an unknown position came the near-silent retaliation of the masked sniper. Barrett's helmet

pinged as the German bullet struck the exterior circumference, the bent cartridge ricocheting and dying peacefully in the night. He slinked to his brother's side, unharmed, tossing the standard-issued protection aside. He giggled and punched the stiff chest playfully. "We are *ma'iinganag!*" he yelled over the puttering emplaced weapon. He bayed like his battalion's namesake, drinking in the cursed rain that refused to stall.

Eventually, the panicking Huns relinquished their temporary vengeance. Their ammunition had come to an unsatisfying, *clicking* end. Barrett would enjoy the kill from afar, the sunrise to reveal only a patch of blood where the fallen had collapsed. The gasoline fire had ceased entirely, returning the field to an eerie hush.

He buried his head underneath Jeremiah's chest and shifted him across his shoulders, draping his legs and arms across his chest like a stylish sweater. With much effort, he clambered to his knees, using the leverage of the cart to boost them completely upright. Collected blood and rainwater ran down the back of his uniform, dripping quietly into the rest of the stew. The clouds provided protection against the shimmering full moon, the sneaky rays blocked eternally.

Down an embankment, he crept, stooping low as their accruement jingled. He and his brother had spent countless hours of their youth wrestling, pinning each other in the vast acreage of their parent's farmland. But his unresistant weight proved unsettling. "*You square bastard. I've got to drag you around now? Can't even be bothered.*" There would be no retaliation, no sweep that would upend him and hamper his supremacy. Readjusting the corpse, Barrett tiptoed through the cultivated rows of the abandoned arable land and saddled up to the disabled tank.

He positioned Jeremiah across the hood, his arm slouched over the turret of the main gun. The slippery residue of unburned gasoline mixed with the charred layer of steel, producing a grimy filament that stuck to his hands and uniform. The hatch had been propped open, his waist barely squirming through the seal. He closed the panel behind him softly and retreated to the machine gunner's seat, his brother's body partially blocking the vision port. His rifle rested upon the metal lip, his eye searching the limited circumference of the lens. Here, surrounded by iron, he and his spotter waited.

Discipline had emboldened him to forgo the need to wipe his face, to swat the flies. Impatience directed him to rush, to sniff out the Hun so Jeremiah could be laid to rest without regret, without the need for the passing of messages to the underworld. "You've got to sit there for as long as I need you to. And don't." He listened politely. "For all the times you left me sitting out there all alone, *that's right*. See if you piss yourself now. I followed you everywhere, and you took advantage of it." He shook his head and managed a smirk. "I don't know how we're related. Mother must have

found you in the woods. Raised by goddamn wolves."

Barrett unslung his field pack and scoured the contents, shifting aside an empty canteen and a roll of cotton bandages. The unused matchbook would suffice. His hand drifted through the gun port and fished through his brother's exterior pockets, the crinkling paper receiving a tug. A cigarette found its way to his lips as he sought refuge on the floor of the tank, spent shells twinkling in the wake of his plopping rear. He struck a match in the safety of his hunched torso, keeping the flame to a minimum.

He puffed his cheeks, inhaling gently. A grotesque coughing fit invaded the confines of the vehicle, his mouth buried in his shoulder like an undead bloodsucker. His stomach gyrated with each lunge, the contents of his meager breakfast from the previous week in danger of finding the French air more pleasurable. He dared to take another drag, perhaps it would quell the first. More echoing attempts at hiding his cough gave way to a peaceful wheeze, the inhale tainted with a fruit-tinged fragrance, the exhale a musty dragon's breath. "No wonder you always reeked," he chuckled.

The downpour's delightful *plopping* against the tank's shell did little to strengthen the moment. Like angry hornets, the droplets crashed into the iron, surrounding him in a barrage of atmospheric gunfire. It drove him to twitch, to remember the days of mortar-dodging and frightful demons soaring from the clouds, tattooing the trenches with machine gun fire and grenades dropped from the cockpit.

He stood up too quickly, his legs devoid of bone, a sinewy *twang* replacing the rigidity. Barrett slumped into the gunner's seat and prepared a second match. He would not be needing the book, at least for his own purposes. Only a spark would draw the Hun's attention. He scraped the head across the strike panel and allowed the flame to settle. To the bulbous troops, he shoved it, igniting the entire squad. His intention vanished unexpectedly from his mind, the brilliant light mesmerizing him. As the heat reached his palm, the pain outlined his original decision, and he stuck his hand through the port, lobbing the burning book onto his brother's thigh. His rifle *clanged* against the iron frame, his barrel wobbling fleetingly.

The flicker was distracting, his peripheral vision unable to separate it from the darkness of his scope's optics. The Hun refused to take the bait, the flaming book snuffed eventually by the pounding droplets. Its sizzling end was muffled by the symphony of thunder, a flash of lighting imposing its will across the battlefield.

Within the interlude came a triumphant coda. Despite its black exterior, its lack of detail, the shimmering, flat face of the German mask smiled. His rifle *bleated*, Jeremiah's body twitching from the direct hit. Barrett struggled to appease his crosshairs, the fading light of the crash casting a frustrating shadow. To the right. *To the right,*

goddamn it! There he was, prone, exposed, cocky.

The trigger evaporated. Or had he pulled it already? Barrett's weapon discharged in the night, the blast reverberating inside the tank in an infinite, deafening roar. His brother slumped across the charred hood, blocking any attempt at a second strike. He loosened the bolt and nervously racked a new round into the chamber, his heart beating to an improvised, syncopated rhythm. He had not heard the satisfaction of an impact, no metallic *ring*.

He retreated from the gunner's seat and hid in the tail of the tank, propping himself against the cold, unused shells of the main gun. There was no evidence. Only intuition. "Did you see anything?" he asked of Jeremiah. When no answer was presented, he drove himself into foolish anger. "*Did you see anything!?*"

A tweeting call rose in the distance, his watch already twisting towards his face. *Six o'clock*. The Canadian pack howled in solidarity, the harmony magnified by the reservists further down the line. Mortar fire was the first to wake, the German fortifications quaking under the sonic percussion. Orders were barked from each end, the Maschinengewehr finding a fresh belt of ammunition. "I should be out there," he huffed. "Not you. Not with *your* goddamn head." He rushed to the gun port and shoved his brother's beaten body aside, revealing the gray morning of Wednesday.

The glittering Iron Cross was hoisted high above the trench as a beehive awakened. Helmets danced underneath the descending lip, grenades and rifle fire launched into no man's land. Whistles signaled the second wave, his comrades risking the open air. A diving, German spitfire unleashed its propeller-mounted weapon, *pop-pop-popping* the charge's front line, delivering a swell of black blood.

Barrett braced his rifle atop his brother's abdomen and took aim at the scurrying Huns. A mortar team repositioned, their spotter's bend not enough to conceal him. The sharpshooter threaded a round through the shoulder, the force churning the wool uniform. Through the collar bone, it exited, ricocheting upward and lodging itself into the base of the jaw. The German vomited, his downfall knocking the mortar device from its stability, an explosive already dropped into the chamber.

It exited with haste, slugging the operator in the gut. The fleshy impact ignited the volatile ordnance, sucking the Hun into a cloud of heat and expelling him outward in a wave of divided flesh and bone. The trench wall crumbled, trapping the others in a black suffocation. Helpless cries rang out; fingers accused the tank of malfeasance. Machine gun fire ripped across the hood, slapping Jeremiah and puppeteering his body into a macabre pose.

Barrett ducked from the sparkling barrage, his free hand reaching for his brother's uniform, pulling it tight against the port. The trembling shield held steady, the exit wounds dousing his face in plasma. "I'm sorry!" he shouted. "It's not your fault.

It's not your fault you dragged me into this. Just don't go. *Don't go!* Don't leave me all alone by the river anymore!" The plowed fields quivered under the concentrated efforts of a mortar strike, the rear of the tank buckling as a direct hit, spread a halo of shrapnel into the air. Barrett held tight to his brother's shell. "*This is what you wanted, isn't it?* You bastards! Come at me!" His free fist beat his chest, enough to bruise. "Come at me," he whispered. "You can't stop me."

The overhead hatch *squeaked* as a beam of dawn gray snuck into the belly. He fumbled for his rifle, the bolt racked cleanly. A black, egg-shaped object *plopped* to the deck and settled rather neatly at his feet. It did not appear German in construction, but, rather, Canadian. Barrett dove onto the grenade and scrambled up the access ladder, bursting into the morning fog. A peer had mistaken the tank for that of a dirty Hun, his retreat cut down brutally by a burst from a Maschinengewehr, the private's intestines forming a squishy pillow in which to cradle his fall.

Barrett tossed the live explosive toward the German line, but the fuse had expired. As he slammed the hatch over his head, a concussive blast ripped across the turf. The sharpshooter beat his head against the iron circumference, flecks of shrapnel kissing his jaw. He plummeted to the base of the tank, the rising victory of Canadian whistles signaling victory.

His throat wheezed, his torso suddenly thrust upright. Disorientation stained his vision, an ear full of cotton employing him to adjust his teeth to dissipate the clot. He had misplaced his internal barometer of time, his disabled watch embedded now with the souvenirs of the discharged grenade. He stumbled to the machine gunner's seat and stared into calming darkness. Small campfires had been erected on the bridgeways of the trenches, though none attended to their luxury. Victory had been achieved, the Huns pushed from their confines; the flag of the Iron Cross no longer waved, the crucifix of confirmed kills uprooted. He collected his rifle and eased open the hatch, a few centimeters needed at first to strengthen his reconnaissance and release the tingle invading his spine.

From the pleasant glow, he took note of a strange absence. Further, he pushed the iron panel, yawning into the night. He disembarked the vehicle and crouched against the treads, scanning the enemy line with his magnification. "Stay here," he ordered, refusing to inspect Jeremiah's state. "I think I hear something." Silence dragged his sly smile across the soft earth, toward the crumbling offerings of the village that once stood guard. The streets were vacant of men, of conveyances, of supplies. The brittle bones and shells of former businesses loomed over him, laughing at his anxious gate. These monuments would be rebuilt over and over again. He had yet to absorb the futility of life.

The avenue blossomed into the courtyard of a

towering cathedral, the townsfolk expanding their empire around the religious beacon. The intact belltower watched the square with contempt, the shadow plastered about the road by the emerging moon drawing a wicked spear to puncture those who dared enter. The broad, oak doors had been parted, a heavenly light emerging from the sanctuary. Voices brimming with victory and hope bubbled from within, a wave of oafish howling imploring Barrett to join.

He snuck through the iron-accented barrier and tiptoed passed the dry fonts of holy water. To the rear pew, his rifle laid across his lap, his head leaning against the bulbous ridge of the seatback. His battalion congregated around the surviving edge of the altar, the group lauded over by the marble soldiers of God's holy army. Their musty uniforms were caked in layers of flying mud and jittering blood, their helmets piled upon the echoing tile. An oil barrel had been commandeered and choked with kindling, the raging inferno angled toward the gaping hole in the ceiling, the result of a lucky mortar.

Barrett traced the ornate molding, down the length of the support columns, over the pleading stone spirits, to a stubbled scalp. His features were square, his jaw jutting unnaturally. His right ear had been surgically removed, a trail of scar tissue tracing the trajectory of a bullet. He smiled at the rapt attention of his peers, his free hand adjusting a Gewehr 98 over his bleeding and bandaged shoulder. His free hand loosely clutched a leather strap fastened to the face of a black, featureless medieval mask. From this distance, it was possible to see the bloodthirsty stare that had peered through the miniature cutouts. Oceanic orbs scuttled about, shadowed by a protruding, prehistoric forehead. His height imposed several inches upon the others, his width multiplying his presence.

The Hun was too preoccupied to notice Barrett's graceless fall, his knees banging quietly against the floor. The German sharpshooter's voice rose momentarily, delivering a delightful end to his tale, the guffawing of his audience filling the rafters with glee. They mimicked the Canadian howl, beating the drums of war against their chests.

A private lugging a pudgy, burlap sack interrupted the preceding, asking for contributions. Several soldiers produced sealed letters, including the sniper, the haul to be delivered on horseback to the Motherland.

Caught now between escape and imprisonment, Barrett kept his stance, his head peering down the sacred aisle. The Hun intervened and paused the messenger from his own escape. They engaged in a friendly, though intense, discussion, the sharpshooter pointing emphatically. The post officer, a green boy of limited age, gladly gave up the task and handed the sack to the German. The others lampooned him momentarily, singing his praises and offering him a round of applause between drags upon their cigarettes.

The Hun bowed and waved his mask, taking his ceremonious leave through the sacristy.

Barrett hustled to the double-entrance doors under the fog of the sniper's celebrity. He trotted around the perimeter and hugged the dwindling, brick wall of the adjoined cemetery, his rifle perched along the railing. He tracked the Hun as he respectfully used the stone walkway to avoid trampling the molting flowers of wellwishers and the grieving.

He maintained a comfortable distance, sneaking between the rotting archways of the town's rubble, his crosshairs magnetized to the back of the exposed head each time he chose to pause. An uncomfortable twitch snaked its way into his trigger finger, a remorseful hesitation.

These were not the established rules of the game.

There was little left to traverse, the roadway ending at the functioning storefront of a livery. The Hun ducked inside, much to the chagrin of the whining horses waiting for transport. The German clicked his tongue, hoping to engineer a familiar tone. His swollen hand smoothed the bucking mane of a pale horse, his lips offering praise. "*Guter junge. Ruhig bleiben. Ruhig bleiben.*" He shushed the beast lovingly, patting its rump with vigor. "*Du bist bereit zu reiten, ja?*" He chuckled and rubbed the length of the steed's nose, earning him respect and obedience. The sack of correspondence was buckled to the saddle and secured.

"*Dreh dich um.*" It was rudimentary at best. Not their first language. "*Dreh dich um!*" Barrett shouted. The Hun would not relinquish his weapon, nor his mask, but complied tediously and turned.

The shivering, scoped rifle elicited a smile from the German sharpshooter. "*Du bist der wolf, der mich jagt?*"

"Shut up! Drop your weapon. Put it on the ground." His barrel indicated the action.

"*Ja, ja.*" The Gewehr 98 dropped into the hay, the mask following.

"You bastard." He trilled his fingers along the barrel's undercarriage, drying his leaking palm. "He wasn't supposed to be here!"

"*So ein kleiner mann,*" the sniper teased as Barrett's eyes clouded.

"You shot him right in the *fucking* head. I dragged him here, and you finished him off. I bet you're proud of that. And now, he's out there *all alone*! What am I supposed to do? *Fucking Kraut.* At least you looked him in the eye, I'll give you that. *I'll give you that.*"

The horses sensed an encroaching disturbance, their hooves rustling anxiously. The livery's entrance peeled open, the post officer gracing the sill, his hand extending a final note. "*Matthäus...*"

Barrett jumped, his boots swiveling. His rifle flashed, knocking the boy into the avenue, his head spouting a river of black.

Matthäus tackled him, pinning him hard against the compacted mixture of dirt and manure. A

brutal haymaker sang across the top of his head, the pain multiplying swiftly down his spine. Barrett reached for his belt, his bayonet freed. He curled his arm behind him and drove it into the Hun's thigh, earning him freedom. Finding his footing, he racked the bolt and stared at the injured sniper. Matthäus removed the embedded blade with a disappointed mewl and pointed it at the Canadian.

The satisfaction of resolution was shattered by the dry fire of his empty rifle.

The German charged, roaring downward with the bloodied knife. Barrett swung his weapon perpendicular, hoping to block the strike, but the Hun's vengeance drove the blade over the walnut stock and into the unprotected shoulder. The native, fueled by the searing heat, returned a prehistoric growl and thrust the rifle into the German's throat, winning him a choking retort.

Matthäus unbuttoned his belt holster and unsheathed his sidearm, forcing a single round free. Barrett's thigh buckled, casting him into the suffocating hay, his bayonet driven deeper into the muscle. He fished for assistance, his hands smacking the tittering legs of the already worried horses.

The Hun dragged the pistol even with Barrett's skull. "*Rote teufel*," he spat.

Barrett spun, prepared to face judgment, to look the bastard in the eyes. The German pistol popped.

The discarded iron mask appeared in front of the sharpshooter, magnetized to the native's face. The ricochet scurried into the rear of the livery, puncturing the neck of a chocolate yearling. Matthäus recoiled, the *pinging* echo rattling his lone ear. Barrett leapt, swinging the heavy shield. The Hun's jaw dislocated against the heft, his pistol ejecting a harmless round into the earth as the mask clapped his nose, ripping the upper layer of skin and denting the cartilage. He stumbled into the darkness, assisted by the Canadian's insistence. With vigor and delight, the protective layer caved in the sniper's face, leaving little to identify him in the stagnant pool building around the shell of his skull.

Barrett stared at the dripping, miniature ports as they framed the Hun's twitching corpse. He longed to remember the face of the perpetrator, but it was lost. Lost among loosened teeth and pulp. Matthäus had adopted his own internal masks, draping them over his victims, bending the reality of existence in order to kill. There was no humanity remaining in a man who cast remorse to the corners of his mind, shackling it indefinitely. He dug through the German's pockets and discovered a ball of shredded cloth. Unwinding the collection revealed crude imitations of his country's flag. He pocketed a copy of the Red Ensign and placed another on the Hun's chest.

The extraction of his bayonet was not without a native curse or two, the humid flow of blood tickling his heaving chest. He pinned the Canadian flag to the sniper, driving the blade down to the hilt. He collected his rifle and stole away into the night,

limping into the obfuscation of the rubble as the concerned footsteps of reinforcements sprinted down the avenue.

Barrett carefully ascending the hood of the French tank and straightened his brother's corpse. He tied the unsophisticated flag reproduction around the moist upper arm, double-knotting it for security. Tears slowly purified the caked grime from his visage; his hand refused to wipe it free. Instead, his fingers found Jeremiah's eyes, the tips carefully shuttering the miniature ports. "I got him...if that's what you were wondering. Big bastard. *Bigger than you*. Twice as ugly even." He inspected the timber wolf emblem pinned to Jeremiah's chest. "You always came back for me, no matter how long it took. No matter how scared I was..." He refused to let the reunion become melancholy. He snorted, vacuuming loose mucus back into his sinuses. "Looks like I'll be carrying your sorry ass from now on. *Lucky me*."

There was no telling how far his front line had been pushed back in the failed offensive. Soon, the Huns would be on his trail, and the sun would rise to spotlight his retreat. He dragged his brother onto his injured shoulder, earning a fresh, vicious flow from both his wounds. He refused to complain. Who would listen to him now, anyway?

The Barrett brothers hobbled into the gloom, following the distant, concerned howl of their pack.

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