

Chapter One

TRENCH ⁴⁷⁹
THE WESTERN FRONT

This godforsaken place!

Captain Michael “Madman” Burke set aside the trench knife he’d been using to clean the mud out of the clockwork mechanism that powered his left hand and closed the access panel with a firm push. He’d been at it for almost a half hour but didn’t think he’d done more than move the dirt from one set of gears to another; he knew he’d need a trip to the rear in order to get it properly cleaned. Unfortunately, he wasn’t due for another of those for at least two more weeks and was stuck with his own meager efforts for the time being.

Such was life in the American Expeditionary Force.

His fingers clicked and clanked as he worked them back and forth, testing to see if his field repair would do any good. There was still some resistance in movement, but not as much as before; for that he guessed he should be thankful.

He rolled down the sleeve of his wool uniform shirt and got up from the camp stool he’d been sitting on. A glance at his pocket watch told him it was time to start getting the men up and ready for the morning “Stand To,” as dawn was less than an hour away and the shamblers wouldn’t be far behind.

It might be March, but the morning air was far more winter than spring, and Burke knew it would have a nasty bite. He pulled his greatcoat out from beneath the blankets he’d slept under and slipped it on, grateful for the warmth his body heat had imparted to the material during the night. The extra heat wouldn’t last long in the cold morning air, but it would at least ward off the initial chill for a few minutes and Burke had been a soldier long enough to know that you indulged in the little things while you could.

Helmet and rifle in hand, he stepped out of the makeshift tent to find Staff Sergeant Moore waiting for him, just as he had been waiting every morning for the three years that they’d been stuck here at the front together.

“Morning, Charlie,” Burke said.

The sergeant gave a noncommittal grunt and handed Burke a tin cup with steam rising off it. The

coffee was weak—they'd been using the same grounds for over ten days now—but Moore had put a generous taste of rum into it and Burke sighed in satisfaction despite the taste.

“What have we got?” he asked.

The sergeant shrugged. “Nothing unusual, sir. McGraw's men reported hearing movement beyond the wire around 0300, but the scouts we sent out came back without having encountered anyone. Probably just more of what we've been getting all week, if you ask me.”

Burke nodded. The enemy had been probing their defenses for six days straight. Never anything too serious, just quick little engagements that forced his men to react, revealing their locations and letting the enemy get a sense of what they would be facing if they did come in force.

Not if, when, he corrected himself. If there was one constant in this war, it was the enemy's implacable desire for the living.

So let them come.

His men were more than a match for any German unit, with or without shambler accompaniment. Lord knows they'd had enough practice.

The Great War was in its seventh year, but it seemed to Burke that it had been going on forever. He could barely remember what life before it had been like, though he was honest enough with himself to admit that his forgetfulness might have more to do with his own desire to put the past behind him than the length of the conflict. Truth was, after Mae's death, he just hadn't given a damn anymore. The days flowed past in an endless haze of gray, one after the other, until he wasn't able to tell where one ended and the next began. In the end he'd enlisted, not out of some misguided sense of duty or vain quest for glory, but simply to try and feel something again. If he couldn't feel alive while staring into the face of death, well, then, perhaps he didn't deserve to live anymore. Of course that had been during the early years, back when a bullet was a bullet and the man you killed with it stayed dead afterward.

Once the Germans invented that damned corpse gas, everything changed.

The last three years had been particularly brutal. While the Allied powers had managed to hang on to the small stretch of ground won at the end of the Somme Offensive, it had been by only the thinnest of margins. Even now the Americans continued to increase their support of the beleaguered French and British armies, sending fresh troops to fill the gaps being carved in the Western Front. As the death toll mounted and the ranks of the opposition swelled, reinforcements continued to arrive; doing anything else could mean certain doom for everything from the English Channel to Moscow.

The line had held, but only just.

“All right then, Charlie, let's get the men up.”

The two of them began moving in unison down the length of the trench, waking up each man in turn and ordering him to fall in at the fire step, ready to defend his position if need be. And most mornings, that was exactly what was needed.

A mere two hundred yards separated the two sides, but that two hundred yards of no-man's-land

was composed mostly of bomb craters, minefields, abandoned trenches, and row upon row of barbed wire, making it some of the most treacherous ground on the face of the planet.

Recently, the enemy commander opposite them had made it a habit to order dawn assaults on the section of the Allied line that was under Burke's command. Which meant Burke had to rouse his troops out of their bedrolls every morning, get them assembled on the raised earthen "step" that allowed them to see over the top of the trench, and wait in the chill morning air for an attack that might not come.

There was a peculiar feeling in the air this morning, a tension that hadn't been there during the past week. Burke had the feeling that the Germans were done testing their lines; an attack was sure to follow, and he sensed that today was the day.

As the men scrambled to take their places along the line, Burke had a quiet word with each of them. They were good men, though many of them were relatively untrained, having only recently been sent to the front to replace the losses suffered over the last month. He gave them a few words of encouragement, reminded them that the men on either side of them in the trench depended on their actions, and then left it alone, confident that Sergeant Moore would handle any other needs the men might have.

All that was left at that point was to wait to see what the enemy would do.

Fifteen minutes later, the man beside him, a corporal named Ridley, suddenly stiffened.

"There's something out there, sir," he whispered.

Burke followed the man's frightened gaze, out across the muddy battlefield to where the first of the barbed-wire emplacements was buried beneath the weight of a thick curtain of fog, but didn't see anything.

After a moment, he heard it.

The sound of movement.

Out beyond the wire.

It was a sound he'd become intimately familiar with over the last few years and one he knew he'd hear in his sleep long after the war was over.

"Steady," he told the men nearest him, and the command was repeated down the line. Any moment now . . .

The first of the shamblers emerged from the fog on the far side of the barbed wire, lumbering toward them with the peculiar gait for which they'd been named. Behind it came at least a dozen more, though Burke was sure that was just the first wave.

They'd once been men; that was easy to see. Some were still dressed in the tattered remnants of the German uniforms that they'd worn while alive, scraps of gray cloth hanging on their desiccated frames; others were naked, their rotting flesh exposing bone in more than a few places. The control devices they wore stuck out as the only intact thing about them; dark collars that encircled their necks and rose up on the left side of their faces to cover that side of the head in a mixture of leather and

electrical components.

But thinking of them as men was a grave mistake, however, for they had ceased being anything remotely human the moment their corpses responded to the call of the corpse gas and rose anew, hungry for the flesh of the living and driven nearly mad from their desire to consume it. The control devices rendered them manageable, but only just. This was fine with the German commanders in charge of the shambler brigades, for soldiers like these were best used as shock troops anyway, fodder to weaken the Allied lines and pave the way for the human divisions that usually followed in their wake.

A rifle went off to his right, then several more, but Burke held his own fire, wanting to be certain of his shot, wanting to make it count.

Back in the days before the war, most soldiers were taught to shoot for the center mass but that didn't do much good anymore. Shamblers were long past the point of feeling injury or pain. You could knock one down with a shot to the middle of its chest and it would simply get back up again. Even blowing off a limb didn't do much good; as long as it could move forward the shambler would do so, dragging itself forward with its bare hands or wriggling its body along the ground. The only way to stop one was to put a bullet in its brain.

Even that wasn't final, Burke thought. Being exposed to the corpse gas would cause the creature to rise once more, which was why his side had taken to burning the bodies of friends and foe alike in giant bonfires after every conflict. The air had become so saturated with the smell of burning flesh that he barely noticed it anymore.

Burke had learned through long experience that if you waited until the shamblers got hung up in the barbed wire, you'd have a better chance of making that head shot as they struggled to pull themselves free. He propped the barrel of his weapon on the lip of the trench and used his mechanical hand to hold it steady, sighting in on one of the enemy soldiers that was currently squirming its way through a hole in the wire. A moment to steady his breathing, a few extra ounces of pressure on the trigger of the rifle in his hands, and he put a bullet smack in the center of the creature's skull. Without hesitation he swung the barrel of his rifle to one side, sighted it on another target, and began the process all over again.

His men were firing regularly now, the sharp cracks of their rifles and their shouts of hatred for the undead blending together into a mad cacophony of sound. From somewhere farther down the line came the rattling burr of a Hotchkiss machine gun and he glanced that way, watching with satisfaction as an entire squad of shamblers were cut down in midstride. Once on the ground, it was an easy matter for the sharpshooters to finish them off.

Just as he'd expected, however, this first group turned out to be just the tip of the enemy's attack. Wave after wave of the ravenous creatures followed, attempting to make their way through the hail of gunfire and reach Burke and his men. Behind them came the German regulars, firing from the safety of the back of the pack and not caring if they accidentally hit some of the shock troops that were trying to

clear the way before them. Burke kept up a steady rate of fire, alternating with the man next to him when one or the other of them needed to reload and snatching quick moments of rest in between waves of the assault.

Some two hours after the attack began, it was finally over. The stretch of no-man's-land directly in front of them was littered with the still bodies of the enemy dead. Thankfully none of the shamblers had reached the trench itself. If they had, the outcome would have been very different, Burke knew.

He reloaded his rifle for what felt like the hundredth time that morning and then, seeing Sergeant Moore making his way back along the floor of the trench toward him, stepped out to greet him.

They were still standing there, chatting quietly and comparing notes on how the new men in the platoon had reacted to the attack, when the ground beneath their feet trembled.

“Did you feel that?” Burke asked.

Moore nodded. “Felt like an earthquake. We get ones like that back in San Francisco all the time.”

An earthquake? Burke thought. *In godforsaken France?*

Before he could express his doubts, the ground trembled again, this time with more force. It shook them about for thirty or forty seconds and knocked several of his men off their feet. Rats burst out of their holes all along the sides of the trench, swarming around the soldiers' feet before charging en masse down its length. Burke had a moment to stare after them in surprise before the ground began shaking for a third time.

The makeshift tent he'd been using as a command post collapsed, as did the stockpile of crates containing ammunition and food stores just beyond. The sides of the trench itself even began to shake apart, great clods of dirt breaking free and falling around them so frequently that Burke began to fear that they all might be buried alive before the trembling stopped.

He wasn't the only one with the thought, apparently, for he saw several of his men praying aloud or gripping good luck charms as the shaking continued. A young private named Hendricks scrambled up out of the trench, silhouetting himself against the sky, only to take a sniper's bullet through the throat a moment later, his body dead before he hit the ground.

Just when Burke thought they wouldn't be able to take any more, the trembling stopped as the trench wall ten feet in front of him burst open from the inside. Dirt flew in every direction as a strange machine rose into the morning sunlight, the three massive drills attached to its snout still spinning wildly as its tracks drove it up out of the earth.

As Burke looked on, stunned into immobility by the machine's sudden appearance, hatches clanked open along its length and a horde of shamblers spilled out of its dark interior, falling upon the men of 4th Platoon with a vengeance. In seconds it was every man for himself as hand-to-hand combat stretched from one end of the trench to the other.