

The Field of Grapes and Ashes

The black morning moved along with a cool breeze over the fields of grapevines. White fuzzies gently fell from the orange illuminated clouds that drifted upon a church, like thick snow falling on the tips of The Alps. It glowed on the hill with an orange hemisphere in its ruined bell tower. Smoke and starched grapes overpowered the nearby lavender fields. Everything was perfectly silent. Just a minute ago, an explosion from inside the chapel occurred, and men yelled out from the French oak doors while being torched to the bone, but then, there I stood in the midst of the quiet fields of grapes and ashes in the aftermath.

I was no medic in my squad, but it was my duty to check for any survivors. At this point, there seemed to be no hope in sight, and what could a stranded man do on a stranded island. All I could do at this point was hope for a survivor, and maybe we could find another squad to join in the nearby village. If no one survived in that church, then it'd just be me and my sniper.

I felt exposed on the hills of the vineyards. Usually a fire would have attracted the French villagers like magnets, but no lights shone from the windows of the medieval-aged homes. The ash got deeper the higher I went up the hill, and my lungs inhaled more filthy smoke. My legs burned as I closed in on the chapel, but I finally made it through the vineyards.

Ash-covered cobblestone steps led to the French oak doors. My muddy boots squished the mud on the cobblestone, and ash glued to their soles. When I had a few more steps to climb, I stopped in my tracks. A body jutted the door and burned away its final flesh. I took my next step to find a lumpy texture under my filthy sole. When I lifted my boot off, a scorched body hid in a sheet of ash. Burnt skin ripped off the body with the boot. As I walked towards the burning chapel, the light from the flames seemed to have faded away.

While I avoided the body from the oak door, I peered it open and got slammed with a wall of humid heat. Once I took a step inside of the chapel, everything from my mind faded away as flames waved into the dark morning sky. It was strange to feel an emptiness inside, it was like living in a vacant dream. I couldn't find my emotions in this mess. Why am I not depressed and stressed with this? It pleased me to be inside this silent Hell.

A slam of an Organ blared inside the church. My mind fluttered back into reality. The organ sat above my head on the second deck. I looked to my left for the stairs, but all I found was another dead squad mate who laid on a wrecked wooden bench. He was our medic. On the right, I found a spiral stone staircase which led to the second deck.

I ran up the awkward spiral steps and found one of my squad members against the organ, his face dead pale, whiter than the snow of ash that covered the vineyards. His hand plopped down from the keys to the wooden floor. I went over to him as my hope sparked back to life. I didn't exactly know the guys on my squad, no time opened for conversations as we were rushed out onto the battlefields, but I did know one thing.

“Charlie!” I said. “Hey, bud. I'm here. It's okay.”

No reply. He was a shocked eighteen-year-old boy fighting in France's fall. I couldn't tell if he reacted in shellshock or if he needed water.

“Charlie,” I said. “We need to get you help. We're gonna go to the village, alright?” Charlie's eyes closed and his head flopped down to his chest. “No, no, Charlie.” I squatted down next to him, wrapped his arm around my body, and lifted him up to his feet. “Damn it, Charlie! Work with me! I can't do this without you.” He stayed on his feet as we walked down the stone spiral staircase and outside in the fallen ash.

The sun rose beyond the village and vineyards, and as its light casted upon the fields, the ash around the church painted a melted canvas of scorched grapes. The soldier's body in front of the church bled down the front steps and dissolved into the ash. The blood pointed the way to the nearby village. We trudged our way through the field of grapes and ashes, hoping to find a way out of this Hell.