Marabunta

Posted originally on the fanfiction.lol at https://fanfiction.lol/works/1482.

Rating:	Teen And Up Audiences
Archive Warning:	Graphic Depictions Of Violence
Category:	Slash (M/M)
Fandom:	Team Fortress 2 (Video Game)
Relationship:	Demoman/Soldier (Team Fortress 2)
Characters:	Demoman (Team Fortress 2), Soldier (Team Fotress 2)
Additional Tags:	World War II, Alternate Universe - Modified Canon, Major Character Injury, Coming of Age
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2026-11-08 Words: 5,462 Chapters: 1/1

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by hanktalkin

Summary

WWII AU - Tavish lies about his age to join the royal army.

The first time I went to the recruiting station, I was fifteen and they laughed me right out, leaving me to puff out my chest in compensation for my smarting pride on the long walk home. When I was sixteen, I had the beginnings of a beard, and those same men barely gave me a second glance as they handed me a clipboard and had me write down my medical history. Back then, I didn't notice how tired the faces around me were, how desperation could sink into the skin through your pores until you could choose to ignore even the most obvious of things. At the time, all I thought about was being a hot shot, off to the mainland, off to prove myself a man.

How different, how much sharper, how much shorter a walk home can be when you've won where it counted. I smiled at a group of girls I knew, boasting as I passed, "you lassies are all in safe hands now, you're welcome, and you're welcome again."

"What are you on about now DeGroot?" Alice MacAra said, but she wasn't mean about it none. I liked Alice. I flashed my grin wider for her.

"*Sapper* DeGroot, reporting," I said, giving a lazy salute.

A little crease sprung up between her eyes, but Leslie Burns said, "well look at you all a bluster! They cannae have believed you were eighteen. They would have turned you right out."

"They did last time," I admitted, but it was with a maudlin humility, one where you know exactly what soil you're standing on. "But a man's got to do what a man's got to do."

Leslie scoffed, but didn't contradict me, her eyes running me up and down in a whole new light of sunspot glory. It affirmed. Everything I'd already known of course, in the way only the young can know that they're so much more deserving of everything they've gotten. Deserving of respect, deserving of girlies' attention, deserving of renown.

Lo that I'd looked at Maysie Cunningham, the third girl they had with them, staring off into space while Leslie asked me if I was going to be a pilot since any Scotsman worth his salt wanted to be a pilot when it all came down to it. If I were different, less cocksure, drunk on my own boyish confidence, I could have noticed how Maysie thumbed the white flower she kept pinned to the front of her shirt at all times. Her eyes drifting far off the conversation didn't matter at the time, it wasn't relevant the flower was for Gus Brown, who'd been doting on her before he'd been shipped out last month. I'd known Gus even. If I'd just *looked* at Maysie I could have seen what an idiot I was being, my future laid out like a tablecloth.

But that'd be a different story than this, wouldn't it?

Instead I boasted, wished a bunch of fine looking girls farewell, and went home. Home, a little cottage away from things. Home, tucked far enough into the hills that the family profession wouldn't disturb the neighbors.

It's the family profession that'd left Da's face the way it was, shrapnel long removed and one eye a deadened white. Less long ago, the other eye had started to catch up, though that didn't

mean he didn't give the old skill his best shot. He spent his evenings at the kitchen table fiddling with wires and carefully measuring compounds, squinting through the film, even as it all got away from him. He denied this with an unspoken yet unshakeable determination.

Home, where I witnessed that familiar picture as I passed through the kitchen door and flinched nonetheless. I hadn't thought he saw me, so I spoke. "I signed up."

"I know," he replied, not looking up. At my surprise, he said, "you went this same time last year."

"Ah."

I stood. He sat, and tinkered, and didn't grow frustrated when the things under his hands didn't move the way he wanted anymore. The way they used to.

"I'm…going," I said eventually. Amazing how everything a young man dreams up about himself evaporates when faced with silence from his father.

Eventually, he said, "she'll be home in an hour."

Ah. The *and I'm not going to be the one to tell her* as clear as a bell.

I nodded. I went out to the vast swath of meadow behind the house, where the hill was a gentle embrace of grass and wildflowers, inclined so mellowly that I wouldn't breath heavy when I made the journey back up. The sides made a bowl like that, a perfect little scoop, as though Fachan had reached down and taken a handful of earth and thrown it aside. To the west, and meandering a bit more, there was a place I could think of as mine. Maybe there had been other youngins who had found it once upon a time, maybe in its long history it'd belonged to lovers and heartbreaks and the imagination of poets, but for me the carpet of bluebonnets on the sun-facing side would always belong to me and me alone. I sat, the inline greeting my back, dots of azure surrounding me in the cacophony of the wind. I waited for Mum to come home.

When it comes to that first night spent crammed in the barest cover while the enemy rained hell's own fires down upon you, no man preserves his boyish idolization of war.

Well, one man maybe, but this story isn't about him. It is about me, and my months, years, centuries, I spent with a rifle clutched to my chest and my back soaked with mud. We were given orders. We followed. We marched. We shot men and had our own lads shot in return and each of us clung to a bit of normalcy like sitting around at night talking about *back home* wherever that was. I liked them well enough. It made things manageable. I spent so long scanning their faces, wondering which—if any—of them had made the same choices I had to get here, had taken those risks. Which of these were just boys, too small in their Das' coats? I was truly alone when I decided *none, not any of this lot.*

By the end, when terrible nights made each of the faces staring across from me look infinitely young and infinitely terrified, I would decide it was all of them.

I wasn’t good with the rifle. I was passable, we all had to be passable, but I wasn’t one of the lads who could disassemble and assemble in under a minute. There was a comfort to mediocrity. Perfectly average. The only surprise I had in me was picking up a grenade that had rolled under our feet one day and chucking it back to hell and high heaven. They’d clapped me on the back, told me good job, because that’s what you do after your mate just killed a bunch of people as long as they’re people on the other side of the hill. I didn’t get what they were so impressed about. I supposed they’d never trained with dummy grenades when they were kids.

They were the good sort. I thought so. I couldn’t tell one commander from the next other than there was always someone saying *go here shoot this*, but the lads themselves were good. And that was fine except when it wasn’t.

“Oi. Dylan, c’mon, we got to move.”

Dylan did not, in fact, move. I knew that, knew he wouldn’t be again, but that knowing part was buried deep within all the numb of my outsides that shielded against grime and flecks of blood. The left half of Dylan’s head wasn’t doing a good job of being an outside. I shook his shoulder a second time, because he was the only one of the company I could see, the only one I hadn’t lost in the tumult.

It had been a joint effort, Royal Army meeting up with the American and French forces, converging in an attack that had sounded vaguely like a good idea when it’d been explained to us. Now though. Now I couldn’t tell if it’d been a trap or something had gone south…or what. May this was just what it was like to lose.

“*Move*,” I said again. The body jostled, slid sideways, and was still.

The sound of bombs dropping, then screeching, then tearing the landscape. It deafened me briefly, and it was enough to finally make me follow my own advice and *move*. I grabbed my rifle and ran, not sure where, not sure whose commands I should be following, desperately searching for anything that looked like a remaining chunk of army in the fields of grey brown grey. One hand held my helmet in place as I clumsily stumbled over mounds and into death traps, every trench threatening to break a leg and leave me there to die when the next strike came. The whirring of planes came again. I half tripped, half threw myself into what only a desperate man would call cover, and put my hands over my ears.

The boom faded. Panic wasn't quite the word in that moment, more frayed nerves sparking like wires cut with a shoddy pair of scissors. Was I even running the right way? There was another body in this hole with me, and I shook it just like I’d shook Dylan.

“Please, *please* …”

I’d turned to begging, understanding I was the last man alive on the whole blighted plot of damnation, going through the motions even as I felt myself shutting down. Which is why it scared me shitless when this body gasped and its eyes shot wide open.

“Christ,” I yelped, falling backwards.

The not-quite-dead man jolted to his feet, even as bullets were whizzing mere inches over our trench. The collapsible shovel that had been forgotten in his unconscious grip now flipped open, shaping his stance to that of violence as he whirled on his surroundings.

He noticed me, flat on my arse, looking up in partial horror as the man in a dilapidated American military uniform stood silhouetted against an orange-and-charcoal sky. He pointed his shovel at me. “You. Private! Report!”

Even shouting, his voice barely made it through the ringing in my ears. “Everyone is- W-we need to get out of here,” I managed to stammer. *And go where?* that statement begged, but my mind was still only half on and I sputtered, “fecking hell I thought you were *dead*.”

“I was not! I was. Resting my eyes.”

A line of blood ran out of his ear down his neck.

Still, he only took half a second to assess the surrounding carnage before snapping his head to the west. “A total and complete disaster of an assault. Hm. Well, no time to waste. Let’s march, private.”

It wasn’t the way I had been going, but. Fuck it.

I was terrified. I was lost, had lost, had familiar faces around me one second and the next I didn’t. I was shaky hands on a rifle I barely knew how to use, and I was the sound of silence right before something terrible was about to happen. But, most of all, I was still a boy, and in that moment the one thing I needed most was a path to follow.

He screamed, “charge!” as he flung himself over the side of the trench.

And like that, I was sucked into his gravitation.

“Down!” I yelled, grabbing Jane by the front of the uniform and bringing us both to the safety of mother earth.

It’d been days since I’d found this one man in a sea of madness. Or maybe weeks. Sometimes it was like he’d always been there, or maybe he wasn’t there at all, even now. Jane…Jane didn’t feel entirely real. From the way he spoke to the way death and consequences simply shaped themselves around him, he was more like a hallucinogenic amalgamation of hyperbolic ideals of soldierhood than an actual person. Some days I wondered if I’d made him up, just to cope with being stranded so many miles into enemy territory. Other days I thought *well why not?* and went to sleep uncaring.

Jane heeded my advice only briefly. Timing was a thing that had been drilled into me by necessity, along with her sisters caution and reverence. You forget any one of the three when handling The Bomb and you don’t live to make that mistake again, so years of honed instincts told me to brace in the dried dirt for a possible secondary wave of shrapnel. Jane cared for none of that. As soon as my grenade had detonated, he popped his head over our cover, slipping his binoculars over his eyes.

“Oorah! Nothing but a crater. Well done, son.”

Jane—with his young man’s voice and still broadening shoulder—was barely older than me, and certainly not by enough to be calling me son. I never pressed it, though. In that voice was something else, something you don’t mistake for a lad’s false confidence. Something I rarely even heard from men three times his age; conviction. Conviction that made you believe things would be right as long as you kept marching on.

I slumped against our cover, pulling my pack protectively over myself. *Here DeGroot, you’re the expert at ‘em, you hold onto the ‘nades.* How long ago had they said that? Shoved off the weight, but also the expectation that I was somehow more equipped than they were, that I’d get them the supplies when needed. I’d been carrying around the bomb bag ever since that day at the field. It weighed on more than just my spinal column.

“We…we should set up a few more,” I mumbled. “As traps. If we’re staying here for the night. I could rig up something like a tripwire that’ll pull all the pins at once…”

My exhausted mind was fizzling with possibilities, falling back into old habits as I mulled over the most efficient way to blow a man up. It was all explosive radius' and walking speeds and whether that patrol had seen us the other day-

Jane hesitated, then sat down beside me. A hand found itself on my shoulder. “I mean it, private. Good work. You’ve done enough for today.”

“Enough,” I scoffed. Like anything would ever be enough.

As unreal as Jane already was, he still found ways to surprise me sometimes. His name, for one, but I was half sure that wasn’t even his real one with the way his gaze had shifted when I’d finally pried it out of him. I’d told him mine too, but he seemed to have forgotten soon after. He did a lot of forgetting. That might have been concerning if I wasn’t so bloody tired.

Other than his name, the man was a mystery. Affection and bouts of clarity were scarce. The hand on my shoulder could have made me follow his advice of sleep just with the comfort of its rarity.

“How much further?” I asked.

“Few days,” Jane said noncommittally.

“And then? You still haven’t told me where we’re going. Are we going to find your company? And *I* still need to get back to…” Somewhere. Assuming we weren’t the last allied forces in the world, isolated from communications and orders.

Jane glanced away. “I can’t tell you where we’re going.”

“Why the bloody hell not?”

“Because it’s a…secret.”

For the first time in a long while, I perked up, the fog lifting slightly. “A secret?”

“I am…on a covert mission.” Jane gained more confidence as he spoke. “To. Kill Hitler.”

“Really?”

The haze of exhaustion that had been following me since I’d met Jane—hell, even before that—lifted ever so slightly. I found myself getting excited. Every boy dreams about daring missions and heroic single acts that save the day; you wouldn’t admit it to your mates, but you dreamed it all the same.

Jane nodded, as though confirming it for himself. “Yes. That is why I can’t tell you about what I am doing or where I am going, and why no one else knows where I am, and also why I am out here alone. Secret and very legitimate mission.”

“You’re not out here all alone anymore,” I said, knocking my boot against his.

He opened his mouth. I didn’t know what I was expecting—not that he’d invite me to his Special Forces operation or anything, or that I could do anymore than what I was already doing following him around like a lost puppy. But it was enough to just be a part of it. To be more than another pair of boots on the ground. And Jane…there was something to his presence. It was a force so strong I’d forget I was taller than him sometimes, to turn to the side and see he'd been looming in my mind when I wasn’t looking. His features were strong and jagged, and his eyes were the sort of clear-water blue you saw only in paintings. The few times he’d taken off the helmet, the sight of them had pinned me by my throat and taken my soul right there.

Jane closed his mouth. He said, “rest up. We’ll move in a few hours.”

More plans, more worries about who might be creeping up on us, but I forced myself to put those back on the top shelf. Instead, I said, “you need sleep too, mate.”

“Me? I just took a nap three days ago! It was very refreshing.”

I sighed, found my head dropping against his shoulder in exhaustion, and didn’t bother to move it.

It’d seemed so close.

Those days, those horrid, final days held no clue to their innards. It was more trudging, a bit more killing—

(Jane was good at killing. It’d be minimizing to say I didn’t enjoy the mechanics of the family trade, but the killing itself…there were things I learned from Jane that I couldn’t have learned anywhere else. I came to love his art, and the way he loved his art too.)

—and then the impossible. A collection of friendly forces, camped, entrenched, safe. Jane scanned them through his binoculars over and over again at my insistence, not daring to believe they were real after the horror we had found ourselves in. But there they were. Within reach.

“Fuck,” I said, slumping over my knees. “Don’t think I’ve ever been happy to see the Union Jack.”

We were just picking each other’s brains on how to approach without them thinking we were charging enemies, when the bombs started to drop.

Like cirein-croin stalking an innocent sea-maid, the attackers were drawn in by the bountiful target, the once empty plain screaming with engines in a matter of seconds. We were nothing in it all. A drop. But suddenly we were back in that hell from months ago, and I found I couldn’t hear myself screaming. Jane dug us a trench. Maybe. The prey part of my brain shouted *hide hide hide* so loud I could barely hear myself think let alone what my companion was doing. Within minutes Jane had excavated one of the old holes that had once been this battleground’s pride and joy, tossing aside the dirt that had fallen in with the seasons as he kept one eye on the sky. He grabbed my arm and dragged us both under. An impact shook the earth so close I swore it had struck right where we’d been standing a moment ago.

We crammed ourselves in the shadow of an earth-wound made by tearing metal fingers, and plugged our ears.

“Hey, keep it together son.”

I hadn’t realized I was hyperventilating until Jane put a hand on my shoulder and kept me from rocking back and forth on the muddy excuse for a floor. My breaths came out in gasps, and it was so much worse than that attack when I had first met him, because then I hadn’t been trapped, hadn’t been boxed in just waiting *waiting* for the one strike that would eventually find us.

“We do not give in!” he kept saying. “America needs you strong; to give in is to hand the enemy their first step to victory, and we are not in the business of handing out steps! What are we, some sort of ladder company?”

I didn’t correct him for what would have been the dozenth time. Instead the panic took hold of me entirely and I said, “I can’t, I can’t, I can’t keep going I-”

“That is deserter talk private! Just remember the respect your country will honor you with when you go out in a fiery blaze, taking every man in a thirty mile radius with you! Think only of our noble, gruesome demise, and how it will inspire a generation to-!”

“I don’t want to be an inspiration!” I all but screamed over the noise. “Fuck, fuck, I don’t want to bloody *die*.”

I thought of blue flowers and Mum at her knitting and Da quietly fixing something in his workshop and a small seaside town where nothing ever happened but also *nothing ever happened*. To give that all up because of something so stupid as thinking lassies would love a man in uniform, that I’d somehow be a man when I got home. I’d be nothing when I went back. I wouldn’t come back at all. All because I didn't want to be someone who sat it out while the older boys went off to war.

Older boys. Because that's all we were: boys, children. That's all I was at that moment. I grabbed the front of Jane's uniform, forcing him to look me in the eyes. "You think it's going to matter?" I demanded of him. "If we die? Here? No one's going to write a bloody song about us, we'll just be another casualty report, another empty coffin gone home."

First that I'd ever seen, for the first time in his life maybe, Jane flinched. Flinched in the face of it all. He turned his head but I kept holding him, to meet those eyes that could cut like ice.

"If we die there's *no* mission, it means *nothing* we-"

The air exploded overhead. My fists curled tighter reflexively, pulling us together, and we stayed there as the heat and the bombs rained down. A scalding, burning sort of heat, that could no more describe *temperature* than the way my face found warmth in the skin of his neck. Cracks forming in an ancient gas vent, he broke, and his hands gripped the back of my uniform and held on for wasted life. And there, in the terror of it all, some bridge was crossed, and we made each other whole.

"We need to go," Jane said in the first gap in the bombs.

I didn't want to. I didn't want him to be right, that this was our one sole shot to make it across the wasteland now that there was a brief gap in between the waves of German fighter planes. Just wanted to curl into the dirt and let myself calcify.

"Now."

The silence was deafening. He put a hand on my shoulder. I urged myself to stand.

We were halfway across when hell came home again. The distance left was meaningless, as there was no way back now, only forward, and I wrapped shock around my mind like a protective blanket. Just keep moving. Just keep staring at Jane's back.

A story ends when a bomb drops too close.

To the left of me, the ground was liquefied, and as I went flying in more pain than I'd ever felt, all I could wonder was if Da had gone through this exact thing. To have it all turn on you at the worst possible moment. I laid in the mud and decided he must have, and every DeGroot before, in a third law of physics sort of way. Like Wayland at his smithy. Arachne at her loom.

"Tavish!"

Jane's voice was hoarse, choked by the smoke that surrounded us. It came closer, but even when his arms slipped under mine and he began to drag me out of the pit, it wasn't close enough. A layer of warbling fog between use as he demanded I keep moving, a tall order as anything.

My whole body screamed in pain. I tried to lift myself, speak as another bomb came down so close, but even moving my jaw sent fire up the side of my face. My vision was red blood and

endless black.

“We need to go,” he shouted, as though underwater. Might as well ask a mountain to nicely step aside. When I replied he cursed, then swung my upper body over his shoulders. I screamed as weight pressed against my wounded side. “No, you’re coming with.”

I didn’t know why he said that. I still don’t. I never asked him about that day, as he carried my barely-living body across that last half kilometer to sanctuary while the very air tried to kill us. Maybe I’d been screaming for him to just let me die.

Waking isn’t like they make it sound in the stories, with a gasp and a head laid back on a clean pillowcase. It is fighting. Fighting so hard you lose track of time, waking, then sleeping, then waking again and wondering if that first ‘awake’ was real or if you just dreamed it. Life came back to me in parts, finding out that it’d been months since my ‘insane friend’ dragged me back here.

And the war was over too. That was a real kicker. I wondered, vaguely as I laid back and tried to fight off unconsciousness, if Jane regretted spending the last moments of the World War hauling my sorry arse out of a hole.

The first time I could move my arms, I did something I’d been dreading ever since I'd first pulled myself from the reaching darkness into the blinding light of the field hospital. My hand cautiously felt up the side of my face, touching the bandages there. I didn’t have to ask a nurse to know that my eye was gone—not just whited-over, but removed entirely. The side of my being that’d been facing the impact was barely functional, and to rub salt in the non-proverbial would I slid a hand down my leg to feel it end abruptly at the calf.

I groaned. If I could fall further backward against the bed I would, but sitting took too much effort. Instead, I marinated in shock, listening to the sounds of the hospital shutting down, the reports discussed loudly in halls, the arguments about how to get us all home.

“Oi, s-sir,” I said the first time an officer came close enough that I could grab at his sleeve. “The one who brought me in…the American sergeant…where is he?”

"The what now?"

"The..." I tried again, blinking away the sitting-up-pain. "The other soldier who was with me."

His grim, pitying look said more than a thousand commands over the radio waves. "We didn't find you with anybody else, lad."

I swallowed, sitting back, the despair crowding out the pain that always hung at the edges of my periphery. And so when the passing man left, the world’s biggest fool lay in bed and closed his eye.

I practiced long, moving about on the crutches. It was almost easier than re-learning how to see with no depth perception, though several times the issues did compound and left me clattering into walls. Easier, since they kept saying I could get a fake leg eventually, that right now I just needed to rest and heal.

But the eye though. There was nothing to be done for it. This was as good as it was going to get.

I wrote letters to Mum and Da. I cried a lot reading the ones they sent back. It wasn’t so bad. Lot of the lads in the beds next to me cried a lot too.

I cried when they picked me up at the station too. I had to let my crutches go, clattering to my sides as I put each arm around my parents and shook while they held me.

So I went back to Ullapool and faded into obscurity, but the good part was that the War faded into obscurity too. The lads that could come home did, knots were tied, everyone tapped their hats over their hearts and then slapped them back on. What else *was* there to do? Eventually, I moved off the crutches since the family tradition of losing body parts meant Da was already primed with personal contacts in the fake leg building industry. I went back to practicing my apprenticeship under him. I put my back against the hill with bluebonnets and let the years pass me by.

Thinking about that poor lad the world had swallowed up. Sometimes the lad was me, a distant version of myself that no longer existed, but other times it was Jane, his body never found, disappeared into the chaos of the bombardment with no one but me to mourn him. Though the War grew distant, Jane Doe only became sharper in my mind, a constant reminder, and strangely enough a constant companion. It didn't stop hurting, that he had left me, had tied me in the knot of his arms deep in that foxhole and let face against neck become more, and then more than that.

So his ghost followed me, to home and then another continent away, but I was never grateful for it.

And when the ghost was made flesh, standing across a new battlefield two decades later under a new name and a new uniform, I didn't even waste the breath to wonder if it was really him. I knew. I knew, in that moment that he hadn't died the day he saved my life, he'd done something much worse: he'd *ran*.

"*You*," I snarled at the first opportunity, taking great fistfuls of blue fabric and shoving him against a wall.

The first moment I could steal in between the fighting, out of the way and out of the camera's reach.

For a moment, I was afraid he wouldn't know me, or would pretend not to, but the way he wouldn't look at me told me that the sight of me was just as painful for the BLU. That stirred something in me. A cruel vindication maybe. But honestly it felt suspiciously like relief. Afraid of my own irrational hands I took a step back and glared.

I waited. He stared aside, the new helmet on his adult features uncanny to the point of haunting. This dead boy who'd never left my mind, now a man and strangely beautiful.

“You weren’t on a secret mission,” I said finally.

I'd meant to chew him out, to ask how *dare* he could leave me, how he could *run*; but instead the age old question fell from my lips, the one that I'd come to realize after years of boyish naïvety falling away.

“What were you doing?," I asked. "Really?”

“Earning my stripes,” he growled.

I scowled until his defensiveness turned to shame and he faced his hands. He said, “I didn’t mean to…”

“I honestly believed it,” I said. “That it was special somehow, something bigger than us. Lord how much I wanted things to *matter*-”

He reached, like he was going to touch my shoulder. I wanted him to, badly in that moment, this man I had followed through hell on a delusion because I’d been that desperate to believe in something. He stopped after barely a second.

“I am. Sorry. Tavish.”

I’d thought I’d hallucinated that, when he’d called my name after the bomb came down. Convinced myself I’d never been fully real to him. If *he*'d been real at all. Hearing it remembered after all this time nearly took my breath away.

The rage went out of me. What replaced it, I couldn't say. Something that no one has found a name for yet. “…Thank you. For saving my life.”

He lunged forward and hugged me.

“I am sorry,” he said again, so close as I seized in surprise. “It was meant to be just me who had to go through it. You…you were not part of the plan.”

I never am, but didn’t say. Instead, I tightened around him, and let the sentiment come pouring from my remaining eye.

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