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BALANCED ON AN EDGE

by

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A coin dropped. Landing on its edge, it spun for several seconds. An eternity seemed to go by before slowly, ever so slowly, it came to a stop, tipping over flat on the cart. Anxious eyes watched closely as it happened, hoping the outcome would favor them. A sigh paired with a groan as the silver face of the denarius stared up at the sky above. The day had been decided, and, as the sun reached its peak, two corpsetakers stood from their cart and tossed their empty drinks aside.

Allan Septowick, the unluckier of the two men, moved from where he stood and grasped the rusting shovel that rested against the cart. It set perfectly into his hands, aligning with the calluses and scars that marked him. He grimaced. “Curse that god damned bloody coin,” he grumbled, not really toward his partner but loud enough so that it was heard. Hefting the shovel over a shoulder, he winced from the ache. Long days spent carrying heavy loads had left him sorer than he could ever recall. Placing his hand on his brow, he felt the beating rays of the sun and the irritating wetness of sweat in equal measure.

“Don’t blame the coin,” responded Hunter Winters. “If there’s anyone or anything you should blame, it’s the man upstairs. He’s the one that makes your luck so poor.” Though his partner’s comment had not been spoken seeking a reply, nor had one been desired, Hunter tended to provide his opinion no matter what. He grinned as Allan picked up the shovel, and he didn’t feel bad that in the last seven rounds, the coin had gone his way five times. Such was the risk of letting a thing of chance decide which role they played for the afternoon, and, though the game had proven very rewarding for him thus far, he knew that the next flip might be different. He supposed that next week there was a chance they would have no need to play the game, no need for corpsetakers, and no need for old coins, but he didn’t believe that. He believed that about as much as he doubted the cross he wore around his neck.

Taking his seat on the cart, Hunter grabbed the reins in his hands and squeezed them firmly. Gently, he urged their draft horses forward as Allan started walking alongside them. They continued at a slow pace, no sounds but the quiet clapping of the beasts’ hooves and the heavier beating of Allan’s boots upon the dry grasses. As they drew closer to the work site, his nose crinkled, and his stomach threatened to heave. “You smell that?” he asked his partner, breathing in the familiar metallic aroma of blood. After so long, he would have thought he’d have gotten used to that putrid stench, but it seemed that was not the case. Thankfully, he managed to keep his lunch down. This time.

Sadly, Allan was not so fortunate. Convulsing slightly, he bent over and rested his hands upon his knees as chunks of sandwich spewed back up his gullet, burning his esophagus and leaving a downright abominable taste on his tongue. Since his sleeves were still rolled, he wiped his mouth on bare skin, leaving a thin layer of vomit on his arm. Compared to some of what he’d have on him by the end of their work day, it wasn’t so bad. At least it was his own. That bloody

smell wafted in through his nostrils again, and he feared a second wave was about to hit him. He wondered, briefly, if it would be his breakfast that came out now instead of his lunch. He'd had hotcakes. That would surely be less painful than a sandwich. A second wave never came though, leaving him on the verge of retching but not doing so. Up on his bench, he could feel Hunter's smile mocking him. He ignored the slight and started walking again.

Cresting a hill, the worksite came into focus for both men. The horses stopped, commanded by their master's pull, and the two corpsetakers surveyed their temporary domain. A nameless sea of corpses spread out for a thousand feet before them, extending in various directions as the conflict had flowed outwards. There were gaps in the sea, places where the currents of combat had lulled and broken apart. The two men could point out the shores, the areas where the soldiers had begun the battle with solid ground and a steady confidence. They could also point out the drop off, the middle of the sea where the two armies had lost their safe terrain and stumbled and crashed against one another forcefully. In that place, the most bodies lay, limply settled atop one another and mixed all in each other's blood. It was a ghastly sea of death, and its foul stench would only get worse if nobody cleaned it up.

That was where the corpsetakers came in, piling dead souls onto their horse-drawn cart and dragging them to the mass grave already dug a few hundred feet away. For lifting full bodies, they used their hands, and for pieces, they had the shovel. A dozen or so corpsetakers would be needed to do the job efficiently, tidying up the latest battlefield in a long line of atrocities during the war, yet only Allan and Hunter had come. Looking at the number of bodies laying in the field before him, Allan knew they would not be enough to do it right, but they would do what they could, just like they had at the last two sites. The carrion crows could take whatever was left over.

Urging the horses into motion again, their cart rolled and bounced along the ground toward the nightmarish landscape they planned to clean. Neither man wanted to be there, surrounded by fallen countrymen and murdered enemies, yet both had volunteered to go. Touching the insignia on his greying jumpsuit, Hunter allowed himself a brief smile as he pulled back on the reins for the first stop. That insignia, the long-necked swan of his homeland, was the second most important symbol he wore, and it was the reason he forced himself to put up with such an abysmal occupation. He watched his partner get to work silently, taking the shovel from his shoulder and placing its tip beneath the severed torso of a soldier, and he steeled himself for a grueling day of work ahead.

Putting his shovel underneath a dead man, Allan continued to hold his breath and prayed he did not puke again. His arms strained as he lifted the iron in his grasp, sweat rolling down his skin and staining his jumpsuit a darker shade in the back. He wore no colors on his clothing, no symbols or sigils of any kind, but as the dismembered body he lifted got closer to his face, he choked back a sob to see the griffin of his people emblazoned on the deceased's armor. He turned away from Hunter as a tear fell down his cheek, wiping his eyes on his shoulder as if he was merely ridding himself of some sweat. Though the face of the soldier remained hidden behind a helmet and a layer of dried blood, he did his best to remember what he looked like before depositing the first corpse of the afternoon into the back of the cart. Dozens more would join it, thrown on top until they could reach the gravesite. They would then be thrown haphazardly together into the earth as if they didn't matter. Still, he tried to remember.

After the first body was put into the cart, the second and third came more swiftly. Arms, still clutching swords and muskets in hand, were tossed in alongside entire bodies, still intact despite being empty husks, and a new pile of death began to slowly form. Flecks of goo and

smears of crimson joined the bit of vomit that Allan had gotten on his arm, and he did his best to ignore them. Every so often, once a corpse was put on the cart, he would wipe his hands off on his pants or rub them together like they were under a faucet. Neither strategy did much to alleviate the grime which covered him, but he did it all the same.

Along with steering the cart, it was Hunter's responsibility to rifle through the possessions that remained on the bodies. It wasn't clean work, his hands and sleeves were speckled by gore, but it was a much less physical challenge than his partner's duty. He thanked the coin for that mercy. Rummaging through the pockets of an older man, he found an envelope, sealed and stained red, bearing a name and address. Putting the envelope aside, atop the stack of letters, name tags, and notes he'd already collected, Hunter continued his crucial work. Many families would find comfort in knowing their missing sons and fathers had moved onto the next life.

In the third hour of their day, as clouds moved to temporarily block the heat, Allan began to find himself tiring out. Grunting, he forced himself to keep going as he put the shovel between two bodies that lay atop one another. They stuck at first, glued together by a layer of congealed blood, yet he managed to cut through and pry them apart. Carefully, he picked one of them up and transported it to the cart, leaving it with Hunter for inspection. He then returned to the second corpse, a wiry body with practically no muscle, and bent to pick it up. He froze. The corpse was a wisp of a man, chest barely wider than a large man's thigh, and its face bore no facial hair of any sort. There was a youthfulness there, an unmistakable adolescence that displayed the boy's age. From looking at him, he could have been no older than sixteen when he was run through by another soldier's bayonet. Killed in a senseless and brutal war.

Pushing his shovel into the dirt for a moment, Allan turned to look back at his partner. The younger corpsetaker, with his golden swan sigil stitched into his shirt, was doing his duty and inventorying the personal possessions of the men they'd already collected. He could not have been but a few years older than the dead boy. Allan watched him for a few seconds, shuffling parchments and emptying pockets, and all the while a frown stretched his face. Finally, he spoke. "Do you really believe the parlay will work?"

Hunter jumped in his seat. "Christ, Al, you startled me." He shook his head and hands out, squinting up at the burning sun as it slowly made its way toward setting. They were not even halfway through with the job. Returning his gaze to his partner, he scooted closer to the side of the cart, sitting partially on its edge. "What did you ask me?"

Allan sighed. "Do you think the parlay will work? Do you think the fighting can ever actually come to an end?"

Biting his lip, Hunter did not answer immediately. He tasted a bit of metallic in his mouth, and he quickly spat into the grass. He hadn't realized that some of the dead men's blood had found its way onto his face. "I don't know," he replied after a minute. "I know that the people want it to end, we want it to end, but that doesn't mean it will. How long have we been fighting now?"

"Eleven years." When Allan said it, the weight of those long years pressed down upon him, and he slumped against the shovel in the dirt. He felt weaker.

Hunter nodded. "Eleven years, and for what? Do you even remember why the war started? Our countries have been fighting for so long that hardly any of us even know why. Now, after all the violence and bloodshed, our leaders are finally coming together to talk about it. These are men and women who have lived with the sole purpose of killing one another for over a

decade. It took *this* to even bring them into the same room!” He gestured to the cart of dismembered people beside him, the sea of death all around, and the stains of crimson on both their clothes. “I think it’s going to be hard for them to move past the hatred long enough to make the peace we all want. That’s what I think.”

Feeling weaker still, Allan did not reply. When he looked at Hunter, the younger man averted his eyes and went back to arranging papers, mumbling to himself quietly. At his feet, the body of the boy gnawed at Allan’s heart, stabbing into a wound which had been festering with every battlefield they witnessed. He and Hunter were what their countries’ leaders needed to become. Even though they came from opposing nations, they had come together over a desire to bring closure to the fallen’s families. For two years, he and Hunter had worked as corpsetakers in dozens of places across both countries’ borders. They argued, they bickered, but they worked together. He thought that if only the leaders of their countries could do the same, then everything could be better. Glancing at the boy’s body, the sixteen-year-old soldier who’d fought the battle which was so horrific it had finally forced peace talks to happen, Allan clenched his fists until the knuckles turned white. Their nations were on an edge, teetering over it as they headed for mutual destruction and even more bloodshed. They needed to find balance, a happy compromise to leave everyone satisfied with the way things turned out. If the upcoming talks were a failure, then... then everyone was doomed.

“How do you have faith?” He asked the question as a murmur, a tiny gust of wind that would not bother a fly. Hunter still heard him, and the god-fearing man reached for the cross which hung at his neck. He tugged at it. Awaiting an answer, Allan slumped over his shovel’s handle and felt the weight of the world crushing him. “You say you think the parlay will be a failure, but you also say that you believe there’s some higher power watching over us. You say

that He's there, and that He influences everything. Shouldn't He be good?" Allan was speaking louder now, his voice a desperate plea to his companion. "If God does exist, then why would He let this continue to happen to boys like him?"

Hunter's eyes flicked to the dead boy on the ground. They stayed there, taking in the sight and committing it to memory. He squeezed his cross harder, scowling. "I have faith in a god," he said to Allan, swinging his legs over the cart so that they dangled close to its wheel. "I have faith in a god that's cruel and vengeful. I have faith in the type of god who lets women be turned into salt simply for being curious. I have faith in a god because it gives me someone to hate when the darkness of the world starts to overwhelm me. It gives me someone to blame. That's how I can have faith."

Allan shook against the shovel, tears running down both cheeks as he stared, unable to look away, at the boy by his feet. He felt Hunter's hand touch his shoulder softly, a comforting difference from the hard weight of the iron he had been carrying, and he let his friend take on his burden, helping him walk stiffly to the cart and climb atop it. "Take inventory duty," Hunter said to him as he stepped away. "I'll finish up." The young corpsetaker, with his swan insignia yet to be besmirched by filth and grime, picked up the soldier boy's body, searched it, and moved it onto the pile on the cart. He moved it to the far side, away from where Allan sat, and wordlessly continued working. Yanking the shovel from the earth, he picked up a few body parts, and then a second corpse, and a third, and a fourth, and he accumulated more stains on his jumpsuit. Slowly, though it took almost an hour, Allan began to recover from his sorrow, searching the bodies Hunter placed on the cart for notes and names. He avoided one body all together.

"The parlay is going to be successful," Allan finally declared at the end of the day, an eerie twilight illuminating the world around them. Their cart rolled away from the sea of death

slower than it rolled in, carrying much more weight than before. “It has to,” he muttered to himself, not wanting a response or acknowledgement. This time, Hunter did not offer one. Instead, he merely reached to his necklace and squeezed.

THE END