

There's a precious moment between the end of the fighting and the arrival of the clean up squads when the battlefield is all empty and nobody's around to bother us. That's when we creep out from the bushes and get to work as fast as we can— 'cause like I said before, the clean up squads come in quickly after all the fighting's done to take away the bodies and the weapons.

I don't care for the battle itself very much, seeing as it's so loud and smells rancid. And even though I'm hidden away in the bushes I always end up thinking about the time my friend Dezer got hit by a wayward bullet and died while he was waiting in the undergrowth. But I don't mind that moment after the battle's over, when the yelling and the death-screams have stopped and the birds start to sing again. Still smells bad though. I breath through my mouth as I work.

The battle was especially violent today, and the field is so crowded with ghosts that I'm forced to stare at my overlarge boots as I walk, watching them squish-squish-squish through the bloody grass. Ignoring the ghosts is pretty crucial to life on the front lines; you can go looney if you actually pay attention to them. Ghosts are like those faint stars in the night sky that you can only see out of the corner of your eye. They're always hovering right at the side of your vision, but they vanish wherever your gaze lands. I've found that staring at the ground or holding your hands next to your eyes like they're horse blinders helps you forget about them.

I notice a man in a royal blue uniform crumpled on the ground, so I hurry a few yards across the torn up grass to claim him. Only the really high ranking officers wear blue uniforms, and they're stripped faster than you can say "this one's mine". I kneel beside the dead man, who's lying face down in the mud. Officers with blue uniforms usually come in on horseback, but since I don't see a fallen horse anywhere I'm guessing the man has been shot off his mount. Shame, that.

Horse tack is always in demand, and people don't ask many questions about where you got it from.

When you're scavenging a battlefield, the first thing you learn is how to strip a body without attracting notice. I've gotten pretty good at it since I came down here two years ago. First I unfasten the medals of honor, most of which are honest-to-goodness silver and will fetch a pretty penny back at one of the army camps. Next I pop off some of his brass buttons, then the badges, then the fancy shoulder pieces—leaving the tassels of course, 'cause you can't buy mud with those. The uniform itself is much too bloodied to be worth anything more than a few coins, and it wouldn't fit in my pouch anyway. I leave it for a more desperate scavenger to find. The last thing I take is a dagger and sheath that was buried underneath the folds of his coat.

I've lingered over this body for too long, and my bulging sack is starting to attract some hungry looks from across the field. Time to move on. I tie up the sack in a tight knot to ensure that no sticky fingers find their way inside and swing it over my shoulder.

The nurses are coming out now, with their crutches and stretchers and bags of shiny medical tools. We scavengers pause in our work for a moment to shoot them hostile looks, which they return in kind. The nurses consider our work "despicable" and "insensitive"—their words, not mine—and they've been trying to chase us off the battlefield for as long as I've been here. Most of us hate the nurses because they sometimes make us hand back our prizes to be shipped to the corpse's nearest of kin. It's a stupid thing to do, I think. At least when we pawn them for money to fill our stomachs we're putting the knick knacks to good use. The family would just stuff them away in the attic and leave them to rot.

I've been staring at the ground to avoid the ghosts, so I practically stumble across the next body—a plain-clothes soldier with a big red stain all across his stomach. He's trembling something awful, like Death has taken him by the shoulders and is trying to shake his ghost out. "Are you... an angel?" the man croaks. It takes me a moment to realize he's talking to me.

“Nah,” I say. I’m going to move on, but then I see something he’s got clutched in his shaking hand. A medallion— real gold. Shit. That medallion could buy me a month’s worth of food and a new blanket besides. I can’t take it now, though— don’t want the last thing this man sees to be some kid stealing his special trinket. Might get him upset. I’ve been haunted before and it is *not* fun. On the bright side, this man looks like he’s got one foot in the grave already. All I’ve got to do is wait.

“Of course...” says the man between wheezes. “An irrational assumption. When confronted with the unknowns of death... we interpret what we see to be all manners of nonsense. How utterly ridiculous, seeing an angel in a—” he squints at me for the first time, “—a grimy little boy.” This one’s a talker.

“Sorry,” I say, all awkward-like. I’ve got no clue what he’s going on about.

“It’s hardly... your fault,” the soldier says. His body is spasming like a leaf in the wind. “If you are not an angel, then I am not doomed to perdition, and all is right with the world. Omitting my imminent death, of course. Death, however, holds no terrors for me... as I have made my living analyzing it.” Now he makes an effort to focus on me. “You have not, by any chance, read my book *The Principles of Matter and Their Relation to the Realm of the Afterlife?*”

“I can’t hardly read my name, sir,” I say.

“Can hardly...” he trails off, but this time I don’t know whether it’s in pain or surprise. “The access... to education among the impoverished... youth of our nation is abysmal.”

“Sure is,” I agree, although I’m starting to feel kind of stupid listening to this dying man with his big fancy words. I feel compelled to add— “But I know *some* stuff. Like, my friend Dezer, he taught me how to make my spit into a bubble and blow it off my tongue. I betchya don’t know how to do that.”

“I don’t,” admits the dying man. This makes me feel sorta proud, so I demonstrate for him. The bubble floats downward and disappears against the twitching, bloody fist in which he clutches the medallion.

“Where’d you get that?” I say, changing the subject and prodding his fist with my finger. If he bought it, maybe he’ll tell me how much it’s worth. I could use information like that to make sure I’m not cheated back at one of the army pawnshops.

“It’s my wife’s,” says the soldier. “She gave it... gave it to me before I left. She’s one of the superstitious sorts that... still believes gold keeps the ghost fastened to the body.” He breaks off into a hacking cough.

He’s lying, that much is obvious—you don’t live on your wits for five years without learning to read body language—but I really don’t care why. He could have stolen the medallion from the Emperor himself for all it matters to me; as long as it’s made of real gold, I’m satisfied.

“Fat a lot of good it’s doing,” I say instead. Maybe I’m being harsh, but if this man is half as smart as he puts on, he’ll already know he’s got bare minutes left.

Through his violent coughs, I think I hear a sort of choked laugh.

“You’re not one to tip-toe around the truth,” he croaks. “No, don’t apologize. You have the makings of a proper scholar. That’s what being an academic is all about after all—finding logic in the illogical. Seeking... Seeking the truth.”

I blink, surprised. I try to imagine myself as a scholar, holding a stack of books, saying something clever and serious. *In this instance the blergosphere counteracts Efferson’s eighth law of Math-Stuff.* I snort out loud. For such a smart man, this soldier is positively stupid.

“Scholars are people with beards and fountain pens and deegrees,” I say, scathingly. “Not people like me.” Dezer told me about 'deegrees'. He said that they’re special awards that universities

give to people when they get smart enough. I've never seen a deegree before, not even in the pawnshops where all sorts of old prizes wind up— medals and trophies and plaques. I wonder what one would look like.

“Oh, child, no, those things do not define an intellectual,” says the soldier. “I am a scholar everywhere I go. Although they may have shaved my beard and taken my pens when I was drafted, my mind is something they cannot take away from me.” He makes a sort of smile, and blood leaks from his mouth. He looks so pathetic, twitching there, his coat all muddy and his chin dripping red and a wet stain on the front of his pants. I fight the urge to slit his quivering throat.

“Nobody's a scholar on a battlefield,” I say. “There's too much fear. Too many ghosts.”

“I'm afraid you have missed the point, young man,” says the dying soldier. “I have been a scholar all my life. I know that when you die, your internal consciousness undergoes a combustion reaction from conceptual to spectral, because I quite literally wrote the book on the topic.” Now he makes a sort of painful wheeze. “My brain has been honed by years of scientific study. I will not cave to primitive superstition.”

Keeping up this argument isn't really worthwhile to me, so the best course of action is to switch tactics. I nod in agreement.

“Yeah. I reckon you're right.”

“Remember this, child,” the soldier says, and his voice is tight with pain. “Ghosts are simply a chemical combustion reaction in response to the shut-down of bodily organs, whereupon the spectral image is projected until the body decomposes, like fire vanishing when the wood is burnt through. That is the only death. Ghosts do not fade to paradise like the Emperor's men would have you believe, those cretins who tore me from my work to fight their pointless border

wars. They are fools, and they are wrong.”

I drum my fingers on my knee. This man is taking longer to kick the can than he has any right to.

I can already hear the chatter of the clean-up squads in the distance. If I hadn't already been safely loaded up with such good loot, I would have sped up his special combustion reaction a long time ago—haunting be damned. If only there was a way to get him to drop the gold without having to take it from him. The beginnings of an idea begin to stir in my mind.

“I dunno,” I say, cool as you'd please. “Seems to me you've still got that medallion in your hand. That's awful religious of you, innit?”

The soldier reddens, and I smile a secret triumphant grin. “My wife gave it to me!” he says, defensively. “I keep it to remind myself of her. She's the religious one, not me. I am a scholar. I am a man of science.”

“You're a dirty rotten liar,” I say. “You close your eyes and act real nervous whenever you say the medallion's from your wife. Fess up. It's your lucky charm. You brought it 'cause you were scared of dying. Scared and superstitious.”

The soldier's mouth opens to defend himself. “I'm not,” he whispers. “I'm not.”

I jerk my chin up. “Prove it.”

The soldier pulls back his shaking arm, and after a single moment of fraught hesitation, he flings his fist forward and releases his hand. The medallion flies in an arc through the hot and reeking air, shiny gold against the blue sky. There is a plop as it hits the mud a few feet from my boots.

“There,” says the soldier. His tone is satisfied, relieved even, but there is a certain wavering tremor to it. “Would a superstitious man do that?”

I am busy removing the medallion from the muck. The gold shines as I rub the mud off on my jacket cuff. The front side has the etching of a ghost on it, eyes wide and mouth agape, which I

recognize as a lucky symbol for keeping your ghost from fleeing. Glory be, this is a nice piece. I'll make a scavenger's fortune at the pawnshop.

"No, sir," I say, sliding the medallion into my jacket's breast pocket where I can be sure it'll stay safe. "I guess you're a man of science after all."

I hear a quiet moan, and I look up. The man's convulsing body has finally gone limp and still, though his bloodstained chest is still heaving. I lean over him, and his gaze catches mine. His eyes are tortured, full of fear and dread.

"Oh God," I hear him breath. "Oh God, oh God."

His head lolls backwards onto the muddy grass, his horrified eyes gone dull.

What a drawn-out affair. Those who die instantly are the luckiest, I'd say.

I reach out and pluck a hanky from the dead man's pocket— there's no real place for me to wash handkerchiefs, so I need a new one every few days. I slide it into my pocket with the medallion. The sound of the clean-up squads has gotten louder, and I realize the other scavengers have already vanished from the battlefield. Time for me to clear out too.

As I start to walk away, I catch a glimpse of the dead soldier's ghost in my periphery. I think he's looking in my direction, but he makes no move to follow me. Thank goodness— being haunted really is the worst. I give him a little wave to say thanks for the medallion and the conversation. I hope that the soldier's ghost is less stressed than the man was, now that he's finally finding his answers.

I blow a spit bubble off my tongue as I walk away, and the wind carries it somewhere behind me.

A storm is brewing. I may not know the first thing about combustion reactions or paradise, but I do know that this medallion's worth enough to buy me a proper sleeping shelter for waiting out the rain.