**In Good Company**

“Well shit. Here comes Hermes.”

The bedraggled group of drab uniformed men peered through tired eyes beneath sodden helmets through the rain. Sure enough, they could just make out the tip of white on the shoulder of the man approaching them. Despite the pounding of the rain, the man was sprinting through the mud, sending the thick stuff flying to all sides.

He puffed up the hill as the rest of the men got to their feet.

“Heh. You should tell him he's got the wrong person again. That was perfect.” Smoky said, chewing on a cigarette hanging loosely out of his mouth. It was unlit, yet he chewed on it regardless, some habits were harder to break than others.

“Hmm. I suppose a joke is only good the first time though. I'll come up with something later.” Charles said. Black hair hung wet and caked in mud in front of his eyes, just low enough to be annoying, and against code. He pushed it to the side for the millionth time and snapped a sharp salute at the incoming man.

“I don't suppose we could hope for orders out of this hellhole?” Andy asked, pushing his helmet out of his eyes.

The others glanced at the recruit and one by one grinned.

Charles reached over with a smile and squished the helmet right back down on Andy's head despite his protests.

“You'd fucking hope wouldn't you? But that just goes to show how fresh you are Andy, my boy.” Charles said with mock enthusiasm. “Nope, I say its thirty percent chance of chilling our feet…” he looked around at the muddy hill, “or soaking them, hahaha…. to seventy percent chance of glorious, glorious advance!” He took a second to salute the sodden scrap of fabric that used to be their flag.

“You can't be serious!” Andy protested, real fear in his eyes. “That would be suicide!”

“Hush, just see what the messenger of death has brought us.”

At that moment, Henry “Hermes” Johnson finished his punishing climb of the hillock to their location.

He puffed to a stop but instantly snapped to attention despite ragged breaths. And despite the rain, his uniform somehow looked better than theirs. And despite the rain, his hair somehow looked better than theirs. And when he spoke it was with such a snobbish yet cultured tone that it was all they could do (even including Andy!) not to knock him off his feet down the hill.

“Sargent Armin!” He said, regarding Charles. “You have new orders!”

Charles also snapped to attention in a flurry of water, much to Henry's confusion. Charles was his superior, there was no reason for him to do that…

The facade cracked a tiny bit. “Uh… yes… The Colonel has reevaluated your squads position.”

“Please be the back line… please be the back line...” Andy could be barely heard, whispering over the sound of the torrential rain.

Henry glared at the recruit for a millisecond. “You are ordered to engage the enemy on hill seventy four at exactly fifteen hundred tomorrow morning. The assault will be preceded by a ten minute artillery barrage after which, your squad and squads three and five are to assault the hill.”

Charles's eye twitched slightly.

“Private Johnson!” he yelled over the rain.

Johnson squeaked. “Yessir!?”

“Did you convey my concerns to command about assaulting hill seventy four?”

“I did sir!”

“And how did they respond?”

“They were concerned sir, but deem the risk necessary!” The messenger said, with a slight evil smile appearing just briefly across his face.

“And did you tell them about the mud? And how the gully is practically three feet of soup?”

“I did sir!”

“And did you tell them about the entrenchments that they were able to put back up after our last assault failed?”

“I did sir!”

“And did you tell them about our reconnaissance, detailing new heavy weapons being brought to these entrenchments?”

“I did sir!”

Charles waited for a moment, perhaps stunned by the decision, perhaps trying to rationalize it somehow to himself. Despite his earlier talk, Andy was right. It was suicide. He stared off for a second into the rain, right over Henry Johnson's left shoulder, right over to hill seventy four. It was just possible to see the slightly darker drab uniforms of the enemy huddling in their own entrenchments.

“Well then I guess we have ourselves a mission, huh private?” Charles shouted, a grin starting to form on his own face.

The facade cracked a second time. Perhaps the private expected outrage, or another message to return to the colonel.

“Uh, sir?”

“I said… I guess we have ourselves a mission! What do you say to that?” Charles yelled a second time.

“Uh… I guess you do sir!” Henry admitted.

“Righto! Tell the colonel we'll be ready to go bright and early! That artillery better not do the enemy's job for them! Dismissed!”

“Right sir.” It was clear that Henry wanted shouting of a different kind. It seemed the private took a sick fascination towards enforcing rules, and crushing the hopes of others. And delivering bad news.

Charles stared at the younger man until he got the hint and started back down the hill.

“And Henry?” Charles roared back at him.

“Yes?” Henry asked, turning back as he ran.

“Watch out for that tree root half way down!”

“Tree what?” Henry shouted back.

At that moment, the tree root in question, which had survived everyone's best attempts at destruction, caught Henry's unfortunate boot firmly, and vigorously rotated him lengthwise into a deep muddy puddle.

The sounds of laughter could be heard as he righted himself. Red faced and angry in the pelting rain, he brushed himself off. It mattered not. Soon all of his tormentors would be very, very and permanently, inexorably, dead.

And with that cheery thought, he ran back towards the command bunker.

Andy collapsed into the mud.

“Oh gods. What are we going to do?” He despaired. “We couldn't even take it last time, even without the rain, and the heavy weapons...”

“We also had about twice as many men.” Charles added, looking around what used to have been a full squad.

“But all that means is that we're going to have to fight three times as hard!” He said with a laugh, slapping the recruit on the shoulder. “Plus it'll be night. Command doesn't know what they're doing but sometimes they get lucky and randomly make orders that actually make sense. If we wait any longer, they'll be the ones who will attack.”

Andy looked up, despondently. “And whats so wrong with that?”

Charles recoiled and held his hand against his chest as though affronted.

“And let *them* have all the glory?” he said aghast. “Never!”

Andy groaned.

“We'll have one last meal maybe two hours beforehand.”

“Here?” Andy looked around the hole where the tent used to have been before it had been shredded by last week's sudden winds.

“Where else?”

Andy saluted grimly.

It was beans again. There was nothing left but beans. Beans for days. Beans for weeks. A lifetime of beans. Somewhere, behind all the fighting and the mud, Andy imagined a massive factory, or a hundred massive factories, all slowly churning out the hated stuff, second by second, minute by minute. And if Andy had known the truth, that the beans were the result of a hilarious, yet coincidental mix-up in paperwork, and that there was a back-stock of a years worth of beans for the company indeed sitting in neat rows of boxes not a mile away, he might have just laid down there in the mud and died.

“So, sarge, what are you going to do when you get home?” Smoky asked, shifting the cigarette to the other side of his mouth as he ate.

“When I get home?” He asked, turning the question over in his mouth, as if he didn't understand.

“Yeah, like when this is all over. You going to start a family? Build a house or something? Do a bunch of drugs? Buy a boat? What's your dream?”

“Huh. Never really thought about it.” Charles admitted, wiping the black hair out of his eyes as he demolished another can of beans.

There was some benefit to the horrifying state of things. Command hadn't adjusted the paperwork regarding their squad's size, or at least hadn't passed the information off the quartermasters: they had a full squads worth of beans, which meant double rations, if not triple.

“Never really thought about it?!” Smoky yelled, shocked. He grabbed the cigarette in midair which had fallen from his lips and placed it securely back in its position.

“Whats the point?” Andy asked, stirring the beans around in their tin, wishing they were anything different, even another type of bean.

“No! You two! You've gotta have a dream! A goal!”

“Fine then Smoky. What's your dream?” Charles asked, throwing himself onto a discarded trunk in front of the chemical fire they were using to cook.

“Well, first I'm going to get shot. Somewhere painful but not too serious. Like an ear or a finger. Then I'm have to get honorably discharged. Then I'm going to sit all nice like in a hospital; a *dry* hospital with an actual roof, and an actual bed, with clean sheets.”

“Stop. Such fantasies are too unbelievable...” Andy moaned, only half joking.

“Shut it pipsqueek. You can share after I'm done.” He turned back to Charles.

“Then, I'm going to seduce the nurse who treats me.”

“How do you manage on doing that?” Charles interrupted.

“My roguish good looks, sense of style, and comedic banter.” Smoky said without missing a beat.

“Then, I'm going to have hot and passionate sex with this nurse for years and have a massive family with her, just like the one I was born in. Then I'm going to cut out one day, taking all the money with me, just like my pappy did. Then I'm going to spend the rest of my life living it up in dive bars, ingesting huge amounts of alcohol and drugs and fornicating with every woman I can buy, until I run out of money and die or die and run out of money.”

Andy looked at him, horrified. “Surely you're not serious?” He asked, choking on the beans which he was attempting to trick his body into digesting.

“One hundred percent serious. See, the difference between between my old man and me will be that I fucking earned it. Look at where we are!” he said, sweeping his hand around the forsaken hill. In the distance the steady thump of artillery could be heard.

“Its hell man. Not figurative hell, but honest to god actual hell. I squirmed and crawled my way right up from the gutter, stabbing and sliming and gutting everything in my way, and just as things are looking up, we all get conscripted. And I'm back here. Only this time its worse: everyone wants to kill me, instead of just *most* of them.”

“But what about your family? Don't you care that you're putting them right in the same horrible situation you grew up in?”

But Smoky shook his head. “That's just the thing! I've learned through the years that life is a fickle, horrible thing. The only pleasures in life are those carved out from those around you, precious fleeting moments of pure greed. A fat man, dancing with a coin of gold atop a pile of bodies. The true triumph of life is when you can sit on the fat pile at the top for those fleeting moments of ecstasy and take it all in, until the senses are dazzled by the sickening brilliance of it all. Then someone stabs you in the back and you start again, until the stab is real of course.”

“All I'd be doing is preparing them for whats to come. I came out of it ok, and I wouldn't want anything less for my own family.”

Andy got the feeling, through the greasy smile on Smoky's face, that the other man was joking. But Andy could honestly not tell by how much. Surely though, Smoky was not one long for life after the military.

“So you've heard my tale of the future. How about you Andy?”

“Oh. Me?” Andy set down the beans in surprise. It flipped over into the mud. He tried not to cry. It mostly worked.

Charles handed him another tin, and the opener.

“Yes. We've now heard Smoky's monstrous portent of things to come. What does Andy look like after this?”

“Hmm.” he thought, prying open the can.

“I don't know. To be honest, its just going to be like before. Exactly like before. I'll be shipped back to boarding school, or have to take a job in the city, or work in the fields. I don't really see how I can escape that. My family is mighty poor, and even with all the money they're promising us, which, by the way, I don't actually expect us to get any of, I predict that I myself will see very little of it.”

Smoky frowned. “I don't understand. Then just book it! Buy a ticket to the southern wilds! Find some exotic woman and do lines of cocaine off her body until you die of happiness. Fuck them!”

Andy recoiled slightly, but not as much as he might have at the beginning of this whole affair. So it was with a defeated attitude that he waved Smoky's vision to the side. “I couldn't do that. They've been good to me. I'm a good son. I'm me pop's only son. I couldn't do that to them.”

“So I just don't see any other way. True, it will be less deadly. And I'll be able to sleep in a clean bed for once, but that doesn't really change things. Nothing does. I gotta work till I die, longer if I ever want a wife or kids, which to be honest doesn't seem likely seeing my efforts in that department up until now.”

Now it was Smoky's turn to look at him with horror. “That ain't no dream son; that's a nightmare.”

“Hey. We all gotta die someday right? But I guess I'd rather it not be here. I want to see the sun again.” Andy said tiredly, looking at the sky. It was night but there was rain. They could not see the stars.

“Truly fascinating. Perhaps Smoky and I can persuade you to dream just a bit brighter.” Charles said, clapping his hands together.

Andy swung his head towards Charles. Charles was grinning. Damn it, how could a man be happy in a situation like this.

“Huh then? How about you?” Andy asked accusatory. “Where is Charles the Bold going to be?”

Charles nodded. “I *have* thought about it now. But you know, I don't think I think I'll be anywhere in particular at all!”

“What? You're going to get yourself killed?” Smoky asked, squinting at the sergeant.

“Absolutely not. I just don't think it matters truly what I do after the war. Surely I will do *something* and I assure you it will be glorious, but I don't think its worth worrying about now. What if my leg gets blown off? If I had plans to water ski, that'd make that a bit harder right? I suppose I just have to wait and see how things are, then make or take the best of them.”

“Take this here war. What do you think of it Smoky?”

Smoky looked out across the muddy hellscape. Muffled shots from afar reached their eyes accompanied by the screaming of men.

“Eh, business as usual. Dour business to be sure, but not all that different from the truth of things.”

“And you Andy?”

“Horrifying, yet inexorable. Merely a prelude to the decades of suffering I will have to endure if I survive, which to be honest, isn't very likely. Have you seen the statistics?”

“Marvelous. You two are quite the sour grapes. You see, I look on this blasted hill of mud, or rather, that blasted hill...” he turned and pointed towards hill seventy four. In the inky darkness, one of the enemy saw him and waved back.

“And I see *adventure.*” The word was a monstrous thing coming from Charles grinning mouth. Was the man fully sane? Hopefully.

“*Opportunity*!” He continued. “This is truly an extraordinary time. Ordinarily, men like you or I would simply be going about our lives, apart from one another, never even a glance towards his fellow man. But here we are! All of us *together* in this! Our little decimated squad, part of our little half manned company, part of our slightly larger half manned battalion, all the way up.”

“Even the old folks and woman back home, they are all in it as well. The whole state, the whole country, all our allies and dominions and puppets, all of us, like a machine, a sputtering, flawed, creaking machine, all churning along towards a common goal!”

“And the enemy as well! They're doing the same thing on their side. All of them also working together in their dysfunctional way, both sides crushing together in this titanic battle of will, were *everyone* from the greatest politician and scientist, down to, well…. us, have a purpose to play. Normally we are all drifting, and useless, but now we have purpose. Everyone has purpose. What could be more glorious than that?”

Andy looked horrified. Smoky looked disgusted.

“Now, I suppose it would be better if we could do the same thing without all the killing I guess. But my sentiment still stays. In fact perhaps the killing only makes it greater. No sense striving, arching, reaching, grasping, crawling towards a goal unless there's some risk to it, right?”

There was a thud close by. They felt the rumble. They could no longer see the far hill. It was nighttime for good.

“My my, look at the time!” Charles exclaimed, snatching up his watch. “Its time gents! Get your rifles in order. Grab all the ammo you can. I have the feeling this is going to be a big one!”

Andy groaned. Charles smiled. Smoky shrugged.

And ten minutes later, right before the last shell dropped, they charged off into the darkness.