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# The tip of the scales

Hayley Kerekes - 5 September 2017

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~1453, CONSTANTINOPLE~

Ciprian felt, more than heard, the whoosh resounding through the air as he adroitly sliced his curved kilij blade through the sticky air. The blade made a dull thudding sound as it found its home in the chest of Ciprian's opponent, and came out as smoothly as it had slid in. Internally, he recited a prayer in his mind as another light of life fizzled out. He let out a grunt as he stepped over the soft corpse of one of the fallen, and took in the hundreds of colourful bodies surrounding him, both fighting and lying on the ground, blood crusting up under the beating sun, strangled curses lying on their lips. With a rallying cry, he charged forwards towards his goal; the one reason he was here and in this wretched bloodbath, Constantinople.

A blow to Ciprian's stomach and in his mind memories flooded back of another country, another time, where the air was frosty and the trunk of a pine tree was coarse against his youthful skin.

~1430, BULGARIA~

Boot met skin as one of the boyar boys landed a heavy kick on Ciprian's gut. He managed to spit some of the warm, metallic blood trickling down from his nose out of his mouth before he blacked out.

Ciprian awoke to the sound of a crackling fire and of boisterous voices spouting words out in a foreign language. He was lying on his back, a thin spread softening the gritty earth beneath him. He opened his eyes and saw five men in the janissary uniform, their white scarves glowing in the firelight. Panic seeped into his brain, hard earned instincts kicking into place. A clump of pines rose in the cover of darkness a few paces away, and he wondered if the needles would cloak his footsteps. His mind flashed back to his beloved friend of his childhood, back to his eyes; beseeching, as the tip of a blade poked through the front of his chest, his body crumpling to the ground and revealing the angry man behind him; his friend, murdered in cold blood by janissaries after his mother refused to go with them. And here they were; come to ruin his miserable existence once again. As he scrambled to move back away from them, he felt several sharp pains all around his body. The strange men heard his groan of pain and exchanged cautious looks before slowly striding towards him.

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~1441, MANISA~

Ciprian was standing under the shade of an olive tree, listening to the exerted pants coming from the dusty sparring ground and the stamping coming from the source of the smell of manure. Closing his eyes, he inhaled some of the fresh breeze coming from the orchards in front of him.

A travelling legion had just returned from a trip to collect taxes from Bulgaria, but the trip had gone sour and they'd ended up silencing the protesting officials.

The men they'd slaughtered were Christian, and had grown up the same way Ciprian had. The man standing next to him, the same one who'd first plucked him from his desolate childhood, faced Ciprian thoughtfully.

'Are you bothered by what happened?' Yavor asked in Turkish, always in Turkish. He was Bulgarian too, yet always responded to Ciprian in Turkish even when he spoke to him in his native tongue. Concerned, Yavor's ragged brown brows knitted together.

Ciprian faced the other way, his mind elsewhere.

It wasn't that he wanted to be back in Bulgaria, for his life there had been one hardship after another, but as much as it had been his hell, it'd also been his refuge. Next to the woods where the boyar boys had beaten him were hallowed churches, associated with the feeling of peace, a sense of being part of a religion that he understood. When he thought of the people that he had known, the cruel weren't the only ones that came to mind. Killing so many people on behalf of another man - it couldn't possibly fit with the religion they all seemed to follow so devoutly.

'They are bad people; they follow the wrong religion and its principles let them break their oaths.'

Ciprian turned his head sharply back to him and gritted his teeth. The religion he condemned was the same that they'd both grown up with before they'd been snatched by another empire.

'But will we not be cursed for killing so many?'

'Our lives, the lives of the righteous, are worth more than theirs,' said Yavor, his eyes glinting sternly now.

Ciprian heard the cautioning in his tone and strode off towards the barracks, feeling the weight of Yavor's eyes heavy on his back.

~1446, EDIRNE~

Ciprian was met by bold, warm colours and cool stone as he entered the city on horseback. The excitement of his comrades was almost palpable, as for many of them it was their first time seeing their family in years. Edirne, the capital of the Ottoman Empire, lay in front of them, the spires of the Muradiye Mosque reaching into the sky under the setting sun.

As they rode into the city, the levels of noise seemed to heighten until the traveling party could no longer hear the clip of their steeds' hooves on the roughly hewn stone, or the tellings of each member's family. Eventually, they found the source of it all, a great

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bustling crowd of people, dressed in their best clothes to see their sultan. Instead of dismounting, the janissaries viewed the scene from above the crowd.

One of the group grinned and glanced over at Ciprian, as if expecting him to be impressed as the man who controlled the fate of thousands of lives came into view.

It was his first time seeing the sultan, Murad II, yet the emotions boiling inside Ciprian's mind spoke years.

This was the man who led the men who killed his friend; this was the man who took him and countless others from their homelands to become his expendable weapons. He wore priceless sartorial displays of riches, but the jewels were made of the blood of other countries, and Ciprian could see nothing but filth.

### ~1453, CONSTANTINOPLE~

Constantinople was taken, the battle over, they said.

Ciprian stood on the dusty ground of the village centre. Staining the rocky earth were rivulets of crimson blood, pooled in some areas near the scattered piles of corpses. The air smelt of metal and sweat, of triumph and despair mixing together into the rancid scent of war. Ciprian fought to keep his legs strong and his chin held high as around him his comrades cried shouts of victory and clapped each other on the back, ignoring their injuries. Heroes; that's what they'd all become, but Ciprian would find it hard to meet anyone's eyes.

This success, this massacre, was foretold. The lives of the fallen were long before condemned by the prophet of Islam, Muhammad. And now, he was supposed to taste the nectar of glory.

His life was worth more than others', he'd been told; his killings were justified. But when would the scales tip out of his favour? This fight was over, but Ciprian knew that his new emperor, Mehmed, would hardly be sated. This battle would be the prelude to a series of events designed to subjugate as much land as possible purely for power, disregarding the current denizens; but this was how the world worked. Tragedies or victories; it was no longer possible to distinguishing the two from each other.

Allowing himself one moment of weakness; warm, salty drops of liquid began to trickle down Ciprian's face. They ran for the dead, and for those yet to be slaughtered by the hands of the supposedly righteous, for those yet to be slaughtered by his own hand. They ran for the innocent, and the boy he once was and would never be again: ragged and beaten, yet true to his heart and his God. He knew that he'd join the ranks of the fallen one day; when his sins caught up to him and the scales tipped out of his favour.

Now, standing among the remains of those who - unlike him - refused to submit to the great empire, Ciprian emptied his mind of all feeling. There were no heroes in war after all; only those with hearts no longer beating, and those with no heart to beat.