

Soldier's Woe

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"I am a soldier. A good soldier. But looking at my hands now, I see the stain of innocent blood. Blood that won't wash away...I look at my reflection and I see the truth of what I've done. And I see the consequences..."

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I am a soldier.

A good soldier.

But looking at my hands now, I see the stain of innocent blood. Blood that won't wash away, though I've scrubbed at it furiously. I look at my reflection and I see the truth of what I've done. And I see the consequences. I see it in the eyes of the other soldiers. We all know what we did, but no one voices it aloud. Perhaps we've convinced ourselves that as long as no one verbally admits this unspeakable act, then we are not truly guilty and won't be held accountable when that dreaded moment of judgment comes to us.

I have stood in this doorway every night since that night and studied the distant horizon, dark and smoldering. I still find it hard to believe that we didn't know. How could we not know? Looking back on it now, I see it so clearly. And I hear it...the silence. Dead silence where there should have been shouting, accusations, cursing. But silence was all we'd received. That should have told us, but we- like everyone else- had been caught up in the frenzy. We were madmen that night, driven forward by the encompassing multitudes that would not have allowed us to stop had we wanted to. But we hadn't wanted to. And we didn't. Now the multitudes go on with their lives as if it is over. But it is not over. Not for us. It will never be over.

Tonight I watch the horizon again, perhaps seeking a redemption that will never come. I cannot ask for redemption, though some believe it is attainable. There are rumors drifting about. Quiet, excited whispers that has the whole place in an uproar. I watch the faces of my fellow soldiers flicker with hope. They hunger for redemption as deeply as I do. I don't try to dissuade them from seeking it, let them have their hope. But as for myself, I won't leave this doorway to go and see if the rumors are true. I think it would be harder for me if they were. I could not bear to face such a reality, though I knew from that very night that it would come to this.

Soldier after soldier slowly stumbles out of the doorway around me. Some bump me as they go by, but no one invites me to go along. Each man is buried within his own personal torment, as I am, and seeks only one thing. I long to go with them, but I can't.

Finally, I leave the doorway and descend the steps. I'm not drunk tonight as I have been the previous nights. I haven't had a single drink. No one has. And I don't want one, which is why I leave. But I don't follow the others; I just walk through the night, hoping for it to swallow me up.

As I walk, I think about the other man, the one who realized his error long before we ever did. He is dead now, by his own hand. I can't help but wonder how many of us will come to the same end, when the knowledge of what we've done becomes too unbearable. For me, that is already the case. But I won't take my own life. Death scares me more than life now, though it didn't use to.

The hill looms before me. The same hill I climbed just three nights ago. But tonight I hesitate at its base, recalling too vividly the events surrounding that first climb. In my ears, I still hear the jeering crowd as clearly as if they still surrounded me. Occasionally, below the shouts and cries, I hear soft weeping. I understand it now, though I didn't then. What have we done? I wonder in agony.

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Tonight, the climb is laboring, as though I'm wading through thick mud. Three nights ago, the muscles in my legs had pulsed with strength as I'd forged up the hill, pushing and shoving, cursing and beating. I had been like a man possessed that night, we all had been.

How can I live with this? This is a question I ask myself with each breath I take. Though death terrifies me, I find myself longing for its eternal embrace. I want it to end, this anguish within my soul. I want peace. I want to close my eyes and sleep until my memory fails me and life is no longer a daily burden. But there is no end in sight. I cannot undo the unthinkable thing I've done.

At the top of the hill, my knees buckle and drop me to the earth. I sit on my heels, my shoulders slumped, my chin on my chest, my arms slack at my sides. The tears are there before I realize they are building. I weep, unmoving. What is there left to do? I know what I want to do, but I can't bring myself to speak the words, even in my mind. I close my eyes and will the words to come. Somehow...somehow perhaps they would bring comfort. But they won't come.

I can hear the panting of breath as someone hurries up the hill behind me. I know who it is without looking. Closing my eyes, I silently will them to go away. But Steven is not a man to be deterred. He was the first of us to seek redemption for our unspeakable act. He alone believed redemption could be found. And now he is here and I know, before he speaks, what he will say.

"Mark." He leans over, his hands gripping his knees as he gasps for breath. "Mark, you must come with me."

I don't open my eyes. I don't acknowledge him. Perhaps he is just a voice in my head, just another voice to torment me. I feel his hand clamp down on my shoulder and squeeze lightly. It is a reassuring touch and it resonates hope, but it frightens me and I want to push it away. But I can't. I can't move.

"Mark." His voice is soft, lacking the despair I hear in the voices of the others, and in my own voice. I want my despair to be gone. I want to feel what Steven is feeling. But I'm terrified to cross that line and believe I can ever be free of this mental anguish. I am so scared. Oh God, I am so very scared.

"Mark, please, come with me."

"I can't." The words faint off my dry lips, barely a whisper in the troubled night. My chest is tight and my eyes damp with newly formed tears. I want to die, I can't take this hurt anymore. I want to beg for a forgiveness that I don't deserve, that I can never deserve. "Go away." I choke out, weeping quietly. I am desperate for what Steven has found, but even if it were real...how could I accept it?

"I cannot, Mark." Steven squeezes my shoulder again. "My brother in arms, my friend, you must trust me. You need not suffer this anguish any longer. Come, see for yourself."

I don't move. I can't move. Deep within my soul I know what it is he wants me to see, and it frightens me beyond words. I cannot look such a reality in the eyes, I cannot. I think that such a truth would steal my life away, wither my soul. I cannot do it.

Steven has gone, but he will be back. I will still be here when he returns. I can't move from this spot. This spot where we did it. As my arms hang slack at my sides, I can still feel the weight of the tools clutched in my hands. I still feel the stickiness of the blood on my hands. Blood that doesn't wash off. Though my hands are scrubbed clean of all traces of filth, I can still feel the blood. I see the tears, but they are not my own. I misunderstood what those tears meant that night. Now I know, and tonight it makes mine flow more steady. My eyes squeeze tight, forcing hot tears to cascade down my flushed cheeks. I am in torment as the images of that night snap through my head. I don't want to see them, I don't want to remember. I don't want to relive that

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night knowing what I know now. But I am helpless. I am now the victim of those dark hours.

Dizziness overwhelms me and I feel as if I'm falling, collapsing to the earth, but I know I haven't moved. In my mind I lay on my back and stare up at the unsettled sky, but what I see is not the night sky. What I hear is not the silence of the dark that surrounds me. The chaos of that night, that fateful night, swarms over me and I am caught in its clutches once again. But as I deliver the blows and the screaming of metal against metal explodes through my head, I understand what it is I'm doing, but I can't stop. Steel against flesh, blood splattering my face, my hands. Cries of the innocent. Oh so innocent. Then eyes watching me as I do it all over again. Eyes filled with understanding and compassion. This cannot be.

"Mark, my brother." A hand touches my shoulder, lightly, barely there. The voice so soft and quiet that I think it is Steven. But it is not Steven. Shame encompasses me and I drop to my face on the ground, covering my head with my arms. "Go away." I beg desperately. "Please don't look at me. I-I don't want to see what I've done."

"Mark." The voice is like a feather on the breeze, floating softly down to gently caress my trembling body. "Look at me, Mark."

I convulse with a surge of weeping. "I cannot." I whisper.

Now Steven is standing before me, kneeling, touching my shoulder. "My brother, you don't have to be afraid anymore." I resist as Steven urges me to my feet, but slowly I stand. I cannot raise my head, I cannot look *Him* in the face. I am so ashamed, so consumed with my own guilt, I cannot live this way. I want to die.

Fingertips touch my cheek, tingling my skin. Against my own will, my eyes slowly lift until I am looking into His. The same eyes that stared back at me with compassion as I spit in his face, punched him and beat him. The same eyes that watched me raise each steel spike into the air and drive it down through his flesh. I drop to my knees hard, clutching his feet, my desperate tears wetting the hem of his garment. I plead silently for his forgiveness but I can't form the words. How can I ask for forgiveness of something so horrendous, so unspeakable?

He lowers to his heels in front of me and raises my face to his. Fresh tears flow as he whispers, "Yours sins are forgiven you, Mark."

A rush of warmth spreads through me, washing me clean as it goes, stealing away my shame, my guilt, my hopelessness and leaving in its wake a sense of newness and life, a hope for tomorrow. "My Savior, my God." I weep.

He smiles at me softly, this man, this same man that looked down upon his accusers and all those that vented at him hatefully, that looked down through history to everyone who would ever come against him viciously or turn away from him indifferently, and pleaded softly, *â Father, forgive them...for they know not what they do.â*

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