

## Hark The Herald

The massacre had happened some time ago. The flesh had rotted from the bones and the bones had been half-buried by the forest. Roots curled among mossy rib cages, and mushrooms sprouted from eye sockets. Whoever these people had been, whoever had done this to them, it was now far too late to do anything but stand witness.

"Why did you bring me here?", he asked, shoulders hunched against the cold of night.

"What is Christmas, if not a time for children and their dreams?", the apparition replied, gesturing to the bones by its feet.

There were children here. Had been. Now there were only the remains of children, splintered and scattered and soon to be buried forever. And whatever hopes and dreams they'd had for their lives were splintered and scattered and buried with them.

"Presumably you're trying to make some kind of point.", the man said through gritted teeth. He was about as average as a man could get; average height and average build, average Caucasian features and brown hair. Only in his eyes could you see a flash of something different, there one moment and gone the next.

"I only thought that you should see the consequences of your choices." The Herald, as it had introduced itself, was dressed in a grey cloak. In fact the grey cloak was all there was to it, covering completely whatever lay beneath, and even that seemed to fade into the background unless you were focusing on it. There was something insubstantial about it, as if it wasn't really there at all.

"So, you think you're the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come? Well I'm sorry, but I don't see what any of this has to do with me."

"If I were a ghost I would be the Ghost of Christmas Past. This is no illusion, these people died and are long dead, and nothing you or I can do will bring them back. But they died because of you."

"I didn't kill them!", the man snarled.

"No. But you didn't save them either, and you could have."

"I don't *save* people.", the man said bitterly. "You know that, better than anyone."

"I know that you have power.", the apparition said placidly. It gave no sign that it cared particularly about the man's obvious distress, or even the outcome of their conversation. But still, it kept going. "Power is neither good nor evil, only the way it is used determines that. And you could have used the power you have to stop this before it began."

"You mean by killing the people responsible for it?"

"Yes.", the Herald said, calm like a glacial lake.

The man didn't answer for a moment. Instead, he knelt down by a mossy lump, and turned it over. It was a skull. A child's skull, missing its jaw and a few teeth, but otherwise intact. Except, of course, for the bullet hole punched neatly through the centre of the forehead.

"Killing never solves anything.", he muttered to himself, almost like a mantra. "It only leads to more killing."

"Everything ends in death.", the Herald reminded him. "Should a doctor let a young man die because saving him will just leave another mortal in the world? A mortal whose body will inevitably sicken and fail him anyway some day. More merciful, surely, to spare him that." The apparition came a little closer, and its hood tilted slightly so that the man felt its eyes on him even though he could see no eyes. "Of course, then the patient would never laugh again, never love, never marry nor have children, nor leave behind any mark upon the world but the sadness of his parting."

"That's not the same.", the man said, but he looked away all the same, unable to bear that gaze.

"It is *exactly* the same, and you know it. You are right, if you had stopped this there would have been consequences. But these people would have been alive to face them."

"And someone else would be dead in their place."

"Are you really going to try and argue that the people who did this don't deserve death?"

"Maybe they do.", the man admitted, but then he looked back at the apparition and in his eyes there was something that would make any man shiver. "But that doesn't mean I'm the one who has to give it to them!", he hissed.

The Herald didn't flinch, even under blowtorch of the man's fury. "But you are. That is your function."

"No it isn't.", the man said, and then because the words didn't seem genuine even to himself he followed it up with: "I don't want it to be."

"What you want is immaterial. There is only what is. My function is to guide, and so I guide. Your function is..."

"Easy for you to say.", the man snapped. "They didn't give you a body, you're not really a part of this world."

"Perhaps. But the fact that you are surely only gives you a greater stake in what happens to it."

"Don't you understand?!" The man rose to his feet and strode up to the apparition fist raised, almost as if he meant to strike it. A few steps away, he stopped. His fist was clenched white and he was breathing heavily. "I am a man. I'm a human being. There is not an organ, a bone, a single solitary sinew in my body that is different to any of theirs. I piss and shit and bleed and weep with the rest of them. Why does it

have to be me?! Why not any of them?"

"Because you know. And they do not."

"How can you say they don't know? They've been told enough fucking times!"

"They are told lots of things, and rarely are any of them true. If they open their hearts they can find the truth, but therein lies the challenge. They don't generally get visits like this... they can never really be sure. Whereas you **know**. There is an order to creation. They have their part in it, and you have yours."

"Maybe I don't want my part in... in all of this.", the man swept his hand in over the scene. "He gave me this body and everything that goes with it. They get to choose, so I get to choose too. And maybe I choose to walk away."

"You can do that. You're right, your corporeal form means you have a freedom of action that I do not. You can choose to disobey." The Guide's voice dropped, and for the first time a note of emotion entered it, although you'd be hard pressed to say **what** emotion exactly. "However, you are not the first to walk that road, and you **know** where it leads. Even if you do out out of compassion... well, I believe they have a saying about a certain road and good intentions. You don't like where you are... do you think the view is any better beside the Morningstar?"

Once again the man looked for a moment as if he was about to strike the apparition. But his fist dropped to his side, and then he dropped to his knees, body crumpling like the rage draining out of him had been all that was holding him up. He put his face in his hands, weeping, choking:

"He knew how hard this is! That's the whole point of this fucking holiday, to mark the moment when He decided to find out for Himself what living in His precious creation was like. The day He found out what a nightmare they'd made of his dream."

"I know. I was the one who announced His arrival, if you remember. And **you** know why He did it."

"You keep saying I know? **He** knows. **Why** would he inflict this on me?"

"Because that is your function."

"I wish you'd stop saying that."

"I can only speak the truth. No more, no less. That is mine. And as for yours..." The Herald reached into its robe, and it withdrew a sword so long that it could not have fit within the cloak and yet somehow still came sliding out, glinting in the dappled moonlight lancing between the branches.

The Herald held the sword upright, as if in salute. And then without warning, as quick and bright as lightning, the sword burst into flame.

"I do not envy you.", the Herald said solemnly. "But this is yours, and no other's. No matter how many times you discard it, no matter how far you go to leave it behind, it will always be yours to bear."

Long minutes passed in silence, but for the crackling flames dancing along the sword. Then, at last, the man rose to his feet and approached the Herald. His tears caught the light of the flames so that he almost seemed to be weeping blood.

Then he wiped his tears away, and reached out and took the sword.

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The village must have been a nice place to live once. The gently rolling hills around it would have been golden with wheat in the summer, and the stream cool and pure, and the forest on the edge of the ridge a haven of shade for man and animal alike. But it was winter now, and the sky was a grey smudge over a brown and barren landscape.

Yet it was not the frost that had shattered the windows of the cottages, though, nor punched through

the roofs of the cattle sheds. It was not the slushy snow that had gouged up the carefully planted gardens, nor the wind that had flattened the telephone poles and the fence posts. It was not the hard winter storms that had turned the forest into matchsticks, shattered stumps spearing out of the ground and little else besides.

The trucks were lined up on the fields that had borne no crops this year, the scars of their tyre tracks criss-crossing not just over the roads but over yards and the remains of buildings. Three tanks set sheltering inside a barn, the cattle evicted. The former residents were long gone anyway; no one lived here now. And yet, the village was a hive of activity. Men in military fatigues were everywhere, moving crates onto or off the trucks, directing traffic this way or that, or just sitting on the rubble beside the carcass of what had been someone's home, faces dirtied and bloodied, eyes glazed.

A few buildings were relatively intact; windows boarded up, perhaps, but they still had four walls and a roof, which was more than you could say of most of them. There was a larger house just outside the village, up its own private track away from the main road running through the village. It had a few pockmarks from shrapnel marring the stucco on its exterior, but otherwise it looked remarkably whole.

Two cars were approaching it up the track. One of them an armoured car with a machine gun on top, the other not military at all but an expensive-looking, black Range Rover. They pulled up into the driveway and three men got out of the Range Rover, all in military camo. Two were young but hard looking, carrying sub-machine guns. The third was bald with loose jowls and a blotchy, beak-like nose, maybe in his mid-fifties and showing every year of it. The two sentries by the door saluted him as he approached; he barely acknowledged them.

"Wait here.", the bald man told the younger ones. "I'll get the shit-heads running this place up here in a bit but right now I need a fucking drink and a sit down on something that isn't trying to ram its way up my arse. How the fuck do you build a road that shit? Fucking thing was nothing but potholes. You!", he spat at one of the sentries. "Is there anyone else in there?"

"Only Colonel Vassilov and his aide."

"Fucking suck-arse. He'd better be ready for me. Is there booze in there?"

"Yes general. The colonel insisted..."

"Good. Anyone who disturbs me for anything less than a full enemy assault will face a firing squad. You understand?"

"**Yes**, general."

"You two.", he snapped his finger at his bodyguards. "Stay here and make these two actually keep everyone out. I wouldn't trust them to stop a fucking Girl Scout selling cookies." He smacked one of the sentries round the head, knocking his cap off. "Look at them. What fucking clown put them in a uniform? You'd think we were losing this war." He spat on the ground.

His bodyguards looked at each other, then one of them ventured: "Sir, I think it might be better if we went inside with you."

"What, you think there's gonna be an enemy agent hiding under the bed? Ah, you...", the general wagged his finger at the bodyguard and smiled, "You just want a drink, don't you? Well, what soldier doesn't, right?" He laughed, and then the smile vanished from his face and he slapped the bodyguard across the cheek. "Don't think, just do as you're told. Stay here and make sure I have some peace and quiet." He turned to go inside the house, then added. "If I'm not out in... say, three hours, come and wake me." He didn't bother waiting for the bodyguard's acknowledgement, just went in and slammed the door behind him.

Whoever had lived in the house before the war reached it hadn't even had time to take the pictures off the walls. Children looked down on the general as he stomped from room to room, their smiles glassy and fixed. There was no one on the ground floor.

"Vassilov! Where the hell are you?", the general shouted. No one answered. Vassilov had been by his side since the war started, it was unusual for him not to come running like a dog when called.

There was vodka in the kitchen, although there was no power to the fridge so it was warm. Well, better than nothing. The general poured himself a glass, downed it in one gulp, then took the bottle with him as he headed for the stairs. Grunting as he dragged himself up by the handrail, he took another swig straight from the bottle, then started started poking his head in the rooms. The first two were empty,

the third...

"Who the fuck are you?"

The man was wearing camo gear just like every other soldier; in fact he was about as average-looking as you could possibly get. But there was something different about him that the general couldn't quite put his finger on.

"I'm sorry, General. I had an appointment with you, but I'm afraid I'm a little late."

"What appointment? Where's Vassilov?"

"The Colonel had to leave early. But don't worry...", the man smiled, "you'll see him soon enough. In the meantime I have a couple of questions for you. Please, sit."

"Who the fuck are you to be asking me questions? What the fuck are you talking about?"

"There are just some details that I wanted to clear up. About the action in April two years ago. You know the one. In the forest."

The general suddenly went absolutely still. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Yes you do. You know." The man's smile didn't flicker, but his eyes were as cold as the frost creeping up the window. "Please, general, you're a smart man. I'm sure you can see that I wouldn't be here if the higher-ups didn't want me to be. Now if you would, sit down and we can get this over with.", the man said, gesturing to an armchair.

For a moment the general did nothing, but then he shrugged and flopped down in the chair. "You make this quick or I promise you I'll string you up by your balls, and I don't care who you know at headquarters."



"And I promise you, just answer one or two questions and I'll be on my way, and you can drink in peace."  
He nodded at the vodka bottle. "May I?"

The general pointedly took a swig without offering any to the man sitting opposite him. "I don't know what there is to talk about. We took care of all the evidence, no one will ever know what happened there."

"In point of fact, you didn't. You were sloppy; a few shallow graves, then after the first batch your men left most of the corpses out in the open. Wild animals got at some of them but there are more than enough left that it won't take long for someone to find them. As soon as this war is over everyone will know what happened there. But that isn't what I wanted to ask you about."

"Listen here you little fuck-pile, I don't know who you think you are...", the general started, but something in the other man's eyes brought him up short. "What do you want to ask about then?"

"Tell me, general... do you worry at all how God will judge you? Do you not fear His wrath even a little?"

"What?" From anyone else the general would have assumed it was a joke, but something about the way the man said it... something about the look in his eyes...

"Please, humour me.", the man asked. "You must know that what you did was wrong. And you must have heard about what God does to sinners. So why did you do it?"

The general snorted, then leaned forward and growled softly. "You really think God is watching any of this?" He gave a little chuckle. "Look around, get to know this place a bit better, and you'll soon realise that God doesn't give a single solitary fuck about anything we do. God isn't going to do shit to me. I shit on him, and I shit on you."

The man sighed. "I suppose you're right, technically. He's not going to do anything." And then he added, under his breath, something that sounded like: "He leaves it to me to do all the dirty work." Then the man stood up. "But that doesn't mean He doesn't care. He'd certainly like to do more, but that would

upset the balance. He made this world for humans, you see, so that humans would be free to make choices. That means the opportunities for direct intervention are limited. If He miracled away every problem, what would be the point? However, there are... loopholes."

"What the fuck are you talking about?", the general spat, taking another swig from the bottle. "Are you completely off your head?"

"I owe you an apology actually. If I'd been doing my job, you might have feared God's judgement a little more. There's no getting rid of sin, that's just the nature of the world, but He likes to make examples. If someone had been there to put the fear of God into you, you might have chosen differently. Don't think I don't have any sympathy for you, because I do. I know all too well how hard it can be to do the right thing, so you have my sincerest regrets." The man sighed. "However, be that as it may, you were free to chose. And choices have consequences."

"Listen you religious lunatic, I don't know who sent you here but I'm going to have my boys work you over and send you back to them in a wheelchair. Or a body bag."

The general tried to rise, but the man put a hand on his shoulder and forced him back down.

"I suppose, in the end, what I'm trying to say is: happy Christmas, general.", the man said, his voice cheerful, his eyes still cold as the winter night around them. "I hope you're enjoying your Christmas present." He looked pointedly at the bottle of vodka.

"What... what the fuck are you doing?", the general said, but he was slurring his words and he couldn't do more than swat limply at the hand holding him down.

"I know. A flaming sword would be more traditional. But the point is to leave as little trace of divine intervention as possible. Keep your people guessing. I shouldn't even have stayed to meet you, but... well, I just had to ask."

"Guards! Guards, get up here!", the general tried to shout, but he could barely get the words out.

"You know what the worst part is?", the man smiled sadly. "I really was happy. I thought I would hate every moment on this miserable world, but mankind... well, not everyone is like you." He patted the general on the shoulder; there was no point in holding him down anymore, his limbs were slack and his breathing shallow. His eyes were still open, though, and his lips moving without sound. "Of course, that's why I have to carry out my duties.", the man added. "If not for Him, then for them."

The vodka bottle slipped from limp fingers and shattered on the floor. The man kept watching, face blank, as the general's chest rose and fell in ever increasing intervals. The general's eyes were still open, looking up, pleading.

"Merry Christmas, General."

When Colonel Vassilov's aide de camp returned from the command post in the village, the guards refused to let him into the house, as ordered. By the time they found the general, he'd been dead for hours, and apart from the corpse of Colonel Vassilov in the basement there was no one else around. Both of them were determined to have died from ethanol poisoning; in other words, a bad batch of vodka. Unfortunate, but not uncommon, although for a general and a colonel to die like that was a significant embarrassment to the military. Still, most people dismissed the incident as nothing more than a tragic accident.

But a few - those who knew the general a little better than most - whispered that it had been God's judgement.