

Blessed Be the Soldier...

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A lone helghast wandered the decayed cityscape. He didn't know where he was going, he didn't know what he was to do. He only knew one thing: He was sick of this war.

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Chapter 1 - blessed be...

2

1 - blessed be...

A lone Helghast wandered through the ruins, the nozzle of his gun leaving winding tracks through the sand as it dragged limply by his side. He did not know where he was going nor did he care. The decaying skeletons of once grand building loomed over him, the lifeless bronze sun reflecting dully on their matte tan exteriors. It was almost as if they were jeering at him with their shattered window eyes and twisted girder teeth. Mocking him for what he was, hating him for what he had done. He slowed to a stop in the middle of a long forgotten intersection and looked around. The blasted remnants of the once boisterous city brought back unwanted memories and, unbidden, the Helghast's mind went back in time.

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The dropship was cramped and uncomfortable, its tiny seats and turbulence ridden ride souring the attitudes of its occupants all the more. If the upcoming battle scared them, it was the silence that cut into their souls, hovering over them like an ominous cloud. It did not matter how invigorating Visari's speeches had been, the half covered truth remained. They were going into a war, their soul purpose to kill and be killed. They were expendable, and they knew it.

The dropship shuddered and came to a halt.

"Okay troops, this is our time! Move, move, move!" Without thinking the soldiers poured from the ship, weapons poised and ready. At once they were bombarded with gun fire and even as the majority of them made it to cover many were killed on the spot. Once confident, one Helghast was now reduced to a panic stricken mess. He did not expect this, the mindless chaos and unbridled violence. Bullets whistled past his head as he spun quickly on the spot, whole body a twitching mass of broken nerves, unsure of what to do and paralyzed with fear.

"Over here!" Without a moments hesitation he turned and ran to the reassuring tone of a Helghast voice, skidding to a halt in the comforting darkness of an abandoned building. Something exploded outside, the concussive blast ringing in the Helghast's ears long after it subsided.

"What the hell is this?!" he asked. His comrade turned to look at him quizzically.

"What is this? It's war." He turned back to the window, gun at the ready. "Now get over here, I need support." The Helghast made no move to join him, causing his comrade to turn in frustration.

"Well? We can't win this if you just stand th-" He jerked and fell to the floor, blood seeping from his shattered helmet. The Helghast stared silently at his lifeless body, the enormity of the situation slowly dawning upon him. Something clattered to his right and quick as a flash he spun toward it, finger trembling uneasily on the trigger of his weapon. And yet, of all the things it could have been, an ISA soldier with a shotgun trained on his head or a fellow comrade, he was shocked to find a young girl staring at him, arms clutched protectively around a battered teddy bear. He lowered his weapon.

“...what...? They never said anything...about innocents...” Before he could do anything her mother rushed in, tears streaming down her filthy face as she hugged her child.

“Please, please don’t hurt her,” she sobbed. “Anything but my baby. Take me instead, just let my baby live...” If only he had known, known about the fatherless children and husbandless wives, known the pain and suffering his kind had caused. But then, that was how it should be, he mused. If any of us had known, we wouldn’t be here, and where’s the profit in that?

“This is...madness.” Without a word he turned and strode from the room, his back to the woman, to the war, and to his own kind.

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The stark reality of the present came back, and with a sigh the Helghast continued his aimless wandering, gun dragging carelessly by his side. Far in the distance the constant sounds of fighting continued, and above it the distinct mechanical whirring of jetbikes, followed by a dull explosion and screams. For a second the Helghast wished he were there, in the off chance a bullet hit him. He was tired of this war and the sooner it ended the better.

His thick boot came down on something soft and he paused. And armless teddy bear lay amid the debris, its chest marred by his footprint. He stooped down to pick it up.

“What’s this?” he muttered. Something clattered behind him and he turned in time to see a tiny hand a whisp of hair disappear into the broken foundation of a building. He looked back at the stuffed bear in his grasp and approached the rubble.

“Is this yours?” he inquired, arm outstretched. There was no response. With a sigh he sat on a ledge, bear held tenderly in his gloved hands.

“I’m sorry all of this happened,” he said quietly. He spied a severed bear arm near his foot and bent to retrieve it. Near that he found a thin piece of metal and a length of twine.

“If only I had known the true meaning of war, I’d never be here.” He started sewing the arm back onto the bear. “Maybe none of us would be here...” The sounds of war drifted over from the distance, gunshots and mangled calls mingling together in a discordant chorus. He finished sewing on the arm and held the bear up to inspect his work.

“Now if I had the other arm, your bear would be good as new.” There was a clattering of scree and a small arm emerged from the darkness, a ratty yet functional stuffed arm in its grasp. The Helghast carefully took it and the arm quickly retreated back into the darkness.

“I realize to you I must look like a monster.” He finished the impromptu surgery and set the bear on his knee. “But I do feel the same emotions as you, and this war fills me with nothing but sorrow.”

“What’s your name?” The girl had emerged from the rubble and sat beside the Helghast.

“...it’s not important,” he replied as he handed her the bear. “What’s yours?” She clutched the stuffed

animal protectively to her chest, as if unsure of this aliens intentions. Finally she relented.

“Rebecca.”

“Are you the only one here?” She nodded, her messy hair bobbing slightly.

“Then we had better leave.” The Helghast stood and offered a hand, Rebecca after a moment taking it.

“Where are we going?” she asked quietly. Far in the distance, rust coloured against a somber orange sky, stood a large building. The Helghast pointed to it.

“There’s an ISA outpost over there. You’d be better off with them than here.” Or with me, he thought sullenly. Rebecca perked up at the mention of the ISA.

“Daddy...daddy’s in the ISA!”

“Your father...?” Rebecca nodded excitedly.

“Me and mom were living here until...” She trailed off. Tears started to well in her eyes. She grabbed hold of the Helghast’s leg, face buried in the cloth of his pants. He leaned down and embraced the stricken girl.

“I’m so sorry,” he whispered. And in truth he was. That innocents like Rebecca had to lose everything for the sake of this useless war was too much to bear, and at the thought the Helghast’s mind was made up. He would help Rebecca find her father, he would get her to the command post, and as of now her safety was all that mattered to him. He promptly stood and turned towards the building in the distance.

“I will get you home.”

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The building steadily grew bigger as Rebecca and the Helghast approached it. Here, at the heart of the chaos, the noise was thundrous; bone-jarring and primal, a dull yet persistent throb that set the decayed buildings trembling on their foundations.

“Stay close,” the Helghast whispered. Rebecca squeezed his hand and sidled closer, her large eyes a sliver of innocence in an all too brutal world. Something exploded nearby. Shouts and yells filled the air, a curious mixture of human and helghast. A quick burst of fire, rat-a-tat, rat-a-tat, and the voices fell.

“I’m scared,” whispered Rebecca.

“I am too,” replied the Helghast quietly. “I am too.” Muddy ash and cinder clouds churned overhead, as if the fighting had disrupted nature itself. A black shape cut through the clouds like a fish through water. Before the Helghast had time to think it was followed by a resounding clap and a rush of dry wind. Another zipped by overhead, followed by another, and another.

"It's escalating," muttered the Helghast. Sure enough the concussive blast of the air raid reached them a few seconds after the jets disappeared.

"Help!" cried Rebecca, her hand instinctively tightening around the Helghast's. Tears streamed down her face, cutting a path through the days of accumulated grime.

"We're almost there," said the Helghast as he kneeled down. Rebecca's sobs quietened yet the terror remained, unused as she was to the brutal violence that constituted the Helghast's day to day life. He felt a pang of guilt but quickly pushed it away.

"Take my hand, I'll get you home." Wiping her face Rebecca took the outstretched hand. The Helghast stood and turned towards the ISA building, a mere twenty feet away, and started towards it, Rebecca dutifully in tow. And it was as he passed over the invisible threshold that separated ISA from Helghast, the girl so close to salvation, that something whistled, a high pitched scream in a world of dull shocks, and the Helghast staggered, a thin hole of red in his shoulder. A minor setback, he thought dully.

"Not far now," he said through clenched teeth, more to assure himself than Rebecca. Then another whistle, another hole, and another half hearted struggle. The Helghast saw the sniper out of the corner of his hazing vision, an ISA soldier set in a broken window halfway up the building, but strangely didn't care. All he wanted was that the girl was safe, and for a second his mind went back to the woman, so selfless in her attempts to save her only child, and suddenly the he understood. So this is what it feels like, to give your entire being up for someone else, someone I don't even really know.

The whistle came one last time, and a strange disconnect came over the Helghast. He paused, a hand going to his chest, only to come back covered in fresh blood. He looked at Rebecca, her face contorted in fear, his mind strangely calm.

"You're home," he whispered.

"I don't want you to leave," cried Rebecca. "Come with me."

"I can't," chuckled the Helghast. "My own people won't accept me now, and neither will yours. I've lived far too long, seen too many things, it's time I left." He fell to his knees, glad to see Rebecca run towards the building, where she was greeted by a couple of soldiers. His mind was drifting, waiting for escape, and he made no move to stop it. He saw the sniper take aim again, the whistle reminding him of that tuneless song his mother had sung to him as an infant, filling him with so much warmth and joy the pain didn't have any hold anymore.

He fell to the ground, his helmet shattered, red mixing with browns and blacks. And for the first time in his life, concealed as it was beneath the muddle of tubes and breathing apparatus...

...he smiled.