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about 2000 words

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MEDIC

by Sara Phillips

“Have you ever killed someone?” they ask.

“Yes,” he says, and for some reason this surprises them.

Yes, he says, and nothing else.

He walks away.

Their gazes, bright with unanswered questions and disbelief, follow him as he exits, but he doesn't elaborate, nor do they voice their dissatisfaction. *Good*, he thinks. They have no right to ask for more; it's not a cliffhanger he leaves them with, but a yellow light, a warning to turn back and keep their inquiries unspoken.

The weight that bears down on his shoulders is not a mere story to be shared as jovially as their valiant conquests, their tales of tenacity and victory, their sure-footed testaments to their superior abilities on battlefields and between bed sheets. They so readily disclose all parts of themselves, as if what they harbor beneath the surface isn't ugly or broken or worth shielding

from foreign eyes. They are nothing but eager to paint their own murals, sing their own swan songs, and erect their own gleaming, ever-gilded memorials.

His own accolades, if any remain to be told on the eventual day of his death knell, will have to be whispered through thick stone walls and left at the door, for his mausoleum will only ever be sealed from the inside, top to bottom, its contents nurtured in the shadows far away from prying eyes. He has nothing to celebrate.

And so, it is to the shadows he returns, fleeing from the campfire around which the others spin yarns and tall tales. Even now, though, he can't help but think the account they seek from him would blend in just as well with the other ghost stories they whisper across the shivering flames.

It's no colder as he steps outside the soft glow of the fire, and he considers for a moment that perhaps its warmth never reached him at all. Few things often do, now. The others, meanwhile, carry warmth with them wherever they go, heated from the inside. They all have a stake in this war, some righteous hand pushing at their backs and keeping them standing even in the face of the most domineering adversary. They cling tightly to their resolve and pity him for lacking it.

In truth, he has no desire for their pity. Devotion can be admirable, but their dedication to this particular cause demands no envy from him, not when he sees so frequently the ways in which it can warp people, shred them to pieces, leave them battered and bloodied and forgotten on the ground, and for what? A moment's glory, an over-embellished anecdote to carry around alongside jagged battle scars, all to be worn equally like chipped and dented badges of honor?

There is no honor in violence.

What do they think awaits them by fighting like this? Rebel, king, guard, *medic*—they all bleed the same. Each ruby drop that collects in the endless well of loss runs together in the end, indistinguishable. Ultimately, words like *us* and *them* fade from existence, and all that remains is the indiscriminate, overwhelming loss.

What a waste.

Perhaps, were he to peer closer, to hold the parchment beneath candlelight and spend hours analyzing the space between each line, each stroke written in the blood of the fallen, he could find the justification somewhere. Somewhere, surely, he could find a reason of his own to hold onto, to press against his chest for his heart to sing and soar in response to. It couldn't all be senseless.

It couldn't all be senseless. And yet...

“Have you ever killed someone?” they had asked. So casual, so inconsequential, so easy.

The way they disguise their murders as self-defense or necessary sacrifices in the name of justice hangs over him even now. They boast, cheer for one another, delight over each body count higher than the last. It's sickening. It feels wrong. It feels senseless. Even as they degrade the monarch and spit venom about the ways in which he continues to fail the kingdom, none of it seems like enough, somehow, to explain the need for such extreme action.

It could be naivete, he muses. It could be that they face dangers and darkness he's never seen, and to rally together like this is the only way out that they've identified. Whether or not it *is* the only way, though, is the prominent question that remains at the forefront of his mind.

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He didn't grow up wealthy, but he would be the first to admit that he's never known poverty. He and his mother have always floated peacefully somewhere in the middle, aware of

hardships but not forged in them, not drowning, not ever on the verge of extinction. His childhood was instead steeped in the scent of the herbs and spices that tickled his nose when he walked into his mother’s apothecary and of the dizzying incense and oils he gradually learned to tolerate as he aged.

He met many people, countless people, and he knew that they did not all share in his privilege. He still recalls the way a frail woman cried on their doorstep with empty pockets, and the way she cried harder when his mother pressed medicine into her shaking hands anyway. He remembers his mother shuffling him into the back room once to spare his sight, and the way he peered through the crack of the door against her instructions, only to blanch at the image of a gaping hole in a man’s stomach. He closed his eyes after that, but no matter how hard he pressed his hands against his ears, he could not block out the wailing of the man’s wife, and no matter how hard he scrubbed the floors in the coming days, he could not cleanse them of their crimson stains.

As he grew older, his mother shielded him less, until the slashes and burns and broken bones no longer fazed him. They were rare, once upon a time, reserved only for those affronted by robbers or wild beasts or drunken hotheads. Most of the time, he dealt exclusively in sickness.

That, however, was a different time.

A sharp uptick in fatally wounded soldiers (and those who wished to be soldiers) was the first indication, the first signal of a changing world. Whispers of rebellion and unrest penetrated the walls of his mother’s infirmary, walls that he thought were safe and secure.

“Worry not,” his mother had said, with a soft hand on his cheek. “What brings the wounded and ill to us is not our concern. What matters is that they come at all, and that they are in need when they do. It is our duty to help those in need, regardless of circumstance.”

And that had been enough, for a time. Individuals passed through their care with more frequency than they had in years, but he kept his head down and tended to each as they came. Until, one day, someone arrived who had no injuries to be mended and no sicknesses to be cured.

“You’ve been a great assistance to our cause,” they told his mother, “but things are escalating beyond our control. We need you out there alongside us.”

He never knew his mother to fear much of anything, but she’d raised him to be far too attentive for him to miss the way her lip quivered as she straightened her spine and prepared to surrender her life to a cause she had no place in otherwise, all because someone needed her, because someone was asking for her help and she knew she could deliver.

At that moment, he had never loved her more.

And at that moment, he also knew he could never let her go, not like this.

“She can’t,” he said, before his mother had enough time to steady her trembling hands. His own voice startled him as much as it did everyone else—he’d stood off to one side, forgotten, unimportant—so again he said, “She can’t. She’s needed here.”

They looked at him, then, finally, and the intensity of their chilling glare sapped the room of its heat. He hadn’t known it at the time, but that was the last he’d feel of warmth for quite a while.

“Innocent people will die because of your inaction,” they told him.

And, oh, how innocent indeed; the words stung him like a whip and provoked all of the compassion his mother had planted in him from an early age. He wouldn’t let them walk her into a battlefield, nor could he sit by idly while innocent lives were lost.

“I’ll go instead,” he said, firm and certain and off the back of a resolve built on nothing of substance.

He would see its fragility soon enough. His foundation would crumble around him as he realized the innocent lives he was promised weren’t always as clean and virtuous as he was made to believe.

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Like now, for instance, as his so-called comrades continue to tout their acts of violence with pride and unadulterated glee. He still hears them as he wanders further away from their circle, ever the outsider.

He tries to maintain his grasp on his mother’s words—*regardless of circumstance*, *regardless of circumstance*—but they don’t light a fire in him anything like that which burns inside all the others. He still tends to them, he’s still happy and willing to save lives, but there’s a certain hollowness to it as well, like he only has half the work he should.

The other side, the enemy—he knows they must have wounded, too, for reasons he doesn’t know or cannot comprehend. It’s with a sinking feeling that he often wonders who, if anyone, helps them when they’re in need, for the influence of his mother’s words continues to forbid him from looking past that. If he can aid those who are only wounded because of their attempts to inflict the same upon others, then he can wish to aid those on the other side, too. Neither is innocent, not really, so why do they deserve the pain?

Perhaps he should not seek to help either, then, since both are so clearly corrupt, but to abandon his compulsion entirely would be to turn his back on the teachings of his mother. His refusal to align himself strictly with either side will have to be enough, he thinks. Whoever comes to him in need will receive his help, just as it has always been.

It doesn’t stop the guilt. Nothing can, he assumes.

“Have you ever killed anyone?”

Yes, he thinks, with blood on his hands and a body on his table, the light fading from their eyes faster than he can hope to stem the thick flow of scarlet dripping from their thigh.

Yes, he thinks, watching a woman he brought back from the brink drive her sword through the torso of another, who drops instantaneously and without a sound.

Yes, he thinks, as a rebel soldier bandaged by his own two hands marches back into battle and does not return again.

Yes, he thinks, bowing his head at the next mass grave, full of individuals whom he could not reach quickly enough, a testament to his sluggishness.

Yes, he thinks, and he remembers them all.

“That’s not killing,” someone else would say. “You can’t save them all.”

He knows. Truly, he does. But when the price of his failure is another corpse, another tally on someone’s body count, another sanguine drop in the endless well of loss, he cannot separate himself from the weight of their motionless forms. He stacks them up on his shoulders, one after another, refusing to leave even a single form behind. He carries them with him wherever he goes, invisible and heavy and omnipresent, lest he forget a single name, a single face, a single soul.

And that is all he knows how to do, in this war without innocents.