Timebent

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by hanktalkin

Summary

Soldier loses the War, but is given another chance. And another. And another and another.

There was blood under his nails and on his boots and in his mouth, but none of it had mattered in the end. One of his teammates had elbowed him inside and there he had stayed, in the lower reaches of the base as he stared down at balled fists until someone on the stair above turned off the light. They didn't notice he was down there. He didn't attempt to rectify that.

Instead, he gritted his teeth at bloodstains that weren't there. All that. All that to be beaten by some English sissy who couldn't hold his drink, who said lies as easily as he moved fingers down a bottle's neck. Who would promise anything: that RED or BLU uniforms didn't truly *mean* anything, that the two of them were above it all. Hah.

Soldier had danced along to his tune. Had revealed things to him things that-

Well. It didn't matter. Nothing mattered when the one thing he still had, the thing that could help him whisper *still got it*, was being A Soldier. A Soldier who didn't lose, or at least went to his death screaming a battle cry, glorious in his doom. But this farce, this fucking thing *She* had arranged wouldn't even give him that. He'd lost, and he was still standing.

He closed his eyes in the soundless cool of the base and wished by anything that he was dead-

And he opened them to his bedroom ceiling.

The familiar spiderweb of cracks oozed from the single ceiling fixture, identifiable even the grayest morning light. Soldier knew without checking it was 5am. It was always 5am when he woke; it was the one thing he could trust, perhaps the *only* thing he could trust from his fluxing diorama of a mind. He blinked away the sand gumming his eyes. He sat. After a moment, he swung his legs out of bed and went to take a shower.

You must understand something about the Soldier. When a man who's had his sanity questioned again and again, by himself and by others, hounded always by the worry—fear, *accusation*—that nothing he says is fact, it dulls his enthusiasm to question. It is simply not worth it to acknowledge when reality is wrong, to press further when he knows something is not right. It was why he didn't bother even that first time when that TV-man came around—and that man was back again, Soldier falling behind the sofa with his shotgun raised, the same demands pouring from his mouth because he said them the first time and they seem just as appropriate now—because although he *wanted* something to be wrong with the RED's voice, he knew he was deluding himself. So do not judge him too harshly for this. There was no fog in his mind, no vague sense of déjà vu that kept him from realizing the facts. He simply discovered he'd done this all before, assumed he was going insane, and thought nothing more of it.

He just wished that going through it wouldn't hurt so much the second time.

They delivered his new weapons to BLU base, eager and waiting for him like a litter of puppies impatient for their master to be home. He shouldered the new rocket launcher, testing its weight. A little heavier near the front—odd, but he'd get used to it.

He had before.

The screeching open of the grates played out like he expected, and because he was expecting the sight of Demo to stab him like a knife to the gut he *should* have been prepared for it. He wasn't. He worked himself up, assuring himself he didn't *care*, that this was payback and nothing more, but as soon as the Demoman's figure stepped seething out into the sunlight his heart proceeded to disintegrate. Demo caught sight of him. That eye narrowed, and he once again screamed something Soldier couldn't parse.

The new rocket launcher bucked in his arms, but the trajectory was for a man running at normal speed, not this unnatural charge Demo somehow managed to master overnight. The RED easily avoided the rocket, and immediately Soldier's life was in danger.

He managed to dodge out of the way only barely, the brutal spike of the shield imbedding itself in the wood where a Soldier-shaped puff of dust was still lingering. This dance again, it seemed. Demo's head whipped sideways, tracking Soldier's leap, and his upper lip curled in a snarl.

They went to their mêlée weapons with little grace but blinding, limb-rendering passion. Was this how they'd been before this assignment? Soldier could barely remember it. It was like a dream those nights, how laughter could feel like explosions and arms over the shoulder was an adrenaline spike straight to the veins. Now was the encore, the steps again, and Soldier smashed aside an oncoming strike so hard it made sparks fly.

Demo drew back, winding up the sword for a downward swing-

He's going to try to feint.

The memory came on so quickly, so powerfully, Soldier had no choice but to obey. He didn't react to the overhead, instead dodging to his left as the sword suddenly appeared where he'd been a moment before. No time wasted, the crooked angle of his pickaxe made short work of Demo's wrist, disarming him in an instant. Another spin, and its diamond-point embedded itself in the RED's gut.

Demo's face was a flicker of confusion as though he, too, was expecting that to play out the same as before. As suddenly as he had appeared, he slumped, and the weight of the other man nearly took Soldier to his knees.

He ended up with an arm full of scot, and then there was no nearly about it. That damn sword had gotten him on the leg, and he was forced to breathe through his mouth due to the friendly hello of a broken nose. Demo's neck rolled back over Soldier's forearm, looking blankly at the sky.

Soldier shared the corpse's incredulity. It was real. He knew things before they would happen. The week of mire and misery was playing again.

He'd been given another chance.

“You,” he told the betrayer, heartbreaker, ex-friend resting in his arms. “You stand no chance maggot. This time. This time victory is *mine*.”

Tick, tick.

Soldier launched so furiously back into the War, you might never have known he was gone. For most people that was the case, but Soldier knew better now. He would not simply repeat the motions oh no, he would strategize, he would improve upon all he learned from his time fighting tooth and nail against the worst kind of enemy.

And it worked. For a time. It always only works for a time.

Because although Soldier was living the War again those around him were not. They began to adapt, and change, most importantly those tactics of the Demoman with whom Soldier was so bitterly embroiled swung to the insidious. He first noticed when—on the second day after he had tore through his detested like he was so much meaty tissue paper—he sat, preparing an ambush. He knew Demo was coming this way, taking his favored flank route around the barely-a-building that lounged up this stretch of Dustbowl. But. It was taking rather long. Too long. Something worried had just settled in his mind when two stickies pattered cheerfully against his back.

Soldier materialized at respawn in panic.

“You uh…alright there pally?” Scout asked him. He nearly bowled the younger man over as he raced past.

It hadn’t been strange to get the post-respawn anxieties, but that had been years ago, years of fighting and anti-nausea pills and knowing where you stand. Like this time. When Soldier had thought there was all there was to know and the eons of time were stretched before him like a tapestry where he could pull every thread. Clearly, there was much to learn.

The end of the week came and went, same conclusion of inevitability. The gulf between scores was narrower, but still. It didn’t matter how *close* to success you came—not when these were the stakes.

Soldier woke at 5am Monday morning. It didn’t surprise him. Some other man might worry if it was a one time shot, that this improbable warping of the forces of nature wouldn’t bend for him a second time, but Soldier didn’t waste the energy. Either it would or it wouldn’t, and when he opened his eyes to a view full of spiderweb, he knew it was the former.

At noon the TV man came by. This time Soldier nodded along patiently. He’d always known Demo would twist the knife in the end, and always would. That’s what happens when you hand people knives. They twist.

Tuesday 7am, and he began to perfect his art. Yes he’d won a few matches the last time around, but shakily, by luck and improvisation. He would start memorizing the patterns, seeing the strings. Demo came at him to spill the day’s first blood, saying something Soldier still couldn’t hear, but this time he knew exactly what to do. Maybe he couldn’t trust his mind much but this he would *make* it make do.

Wednesday was better. He was beginning to understand the Demoman, how he reacted when he lost, when he won. Soldier was starting to wonder if he knew him in ways that would be impossible under normal circumstances; the way he moved, how he ticked. Each muscle moving under his skin when he swung that blade. Few could study another individual so fully. Not to this extent.

Obsession was fine. It was what he needed right now.

He still lost that week. But the margin was closing, and he had all the time in the world.

Monday. Wake up. Shower. *Conflict of interest*. As long as he agreed right off the bat, they wouldn't even bother showing him the video. He preferred it that way. Despite how it shouldn't hurt anymore. He didn't like to see it.

He killed Demo thirteen times in a single day.

On Friday, he won.

Despite shreds of time littered at his feet, *this* seemed the most unbelievable thing. Now it was Demo who was forced to turn, tail between his legs, Soldier's teammates jeering as he left. The man with the TV was there for the commencement. Or maybe it was a different man, who's to say? "Congratulations," his woman said. "You have avoided disappointing me. Your reward is waiting for you on base."

They were shoes. Just shoes. A couple of boots that were—yes—sturdy and American-made, but they were just shoes. He pried open the Mann Co. crate with a crowbar and just stood there staring at them, long after the rest of BLU had tottered into their cars and gone home, long after he stopped feeling his fingers. Whoever had been last out had forgotten to close the front door you see, so it had grown quite cold. Whoever it was probably thought Soldier would lock up when he left.

If he left.

He never did.

By the last stroke of midnight, he could no longer feel any of his extremities, except where he'd been slowly pushing his thumb into a large splinter of wood, feeling the rightness in the way blood welled at the end of it.

Night snapped away and Soldier snapped up in bed. Something strangled, panicked, escaped his voicebox that might have been 'no' but that was giving him quite a lot of credit. He scrambled to his feet, kicking away what would have been sheets if the Soldier wasn't so committed to sleeping on a bare mattress on the floor. He checked his footlocker: nothing. Not under the dresser, not in the small pile of clothes that was really more of the functional dresser than his actual one.

He had hoped. Truly hoped that if he could find the Gunboats, that would break the spell. It would prove that his sudden lapse in memory was just one of his usual gaps, and he had gone

home that night and tucked his prize safely away. But then the knock came, and the *civilian* from the TV, and the static that always followed.

He hadn't escaped.

Maybe he should just try harder.

Every day he woke and every day his score grew taller. More and more, win after win, opening the crate with the Gunboats and staring down at them, praying this would be the time. What more could She want from him? What more could he give? He achieved success and still *She would not let him escape*.

There was a strange satisfaction in tormenting the Demoman. If this was Soldier's hell, why couldn't it be his too? It was his fault after all, his fault hIS FAULT-

"Jane. Jane please-"

You could always wring a new reaction out of him. It was of the few pleasures Soldier had left, trying to poke there, prod there, see something new. If Soldier only used his stock, what then? If he dodged all battle, would it drive the RED crazy?

"Stop, would you just-"

The only thing of interest. The only thing Soldier cared about anymore, only thing he cared to understand-

"JANE."

Soldier ground to a halt. He'd been walking forward in a daze, step by menacing step, his broken arm hanging limply to his side while the other hand clutched his pickaxe. There was a trail of blood down the alley behind him.

In front was a Demoman far worse off than he was. His eye was swollen and purple around the edges, bruises stretching his face until it was all the consistency of pounded meat. He sat awkwardly, back pressed against the wall, his leg tucked under him in a way it definitely wasn't supposed to bend. He was crying.

"Jesus Jane…why. Why all of this?"

Soldier woozily looked around. He barely remembered hunting the injured Demo into this corner of the map. These days were so filled with violence they blended, TV static and a face always watching.

Demo curled further into himself. "…Oh Jesus. I know why. I deserve this don't I? Earned it. Devil's deal and you *earn* yourself hell. I'm sorry, God I'm sorry. Jane I…"

Demo…Demo was talking to him. Never, in all the-

Months was it now? Sweet Lady Liberty.

-Soldier had been running this course had he been able to accomplish that before. And suddenly, every synapse in his body screaming for it at once, he needed Demo's words like he needed air to breathe.

But with just as much certainty, he realized was terrified to hear it. All he'd had to do to get a word from his best friend was torture him, over and over, until he had begged Soldier to stop. Wasn't that funny? Just plain hilarious.

Soldier turned and ran.

He waited out the rest of that night away from chokepoints and sunlight. Battle still found him, but thankfully never the Demoman, never the one person Soldier would regret. This lost opportunity for points hardly mattered however; no, Soldier's count was too far-gone for that. The Administrator presented him with another pair of Gunboats. He stared at them. This needed to work this time, he knew, he *knew* he hadn't done as well but please, please he needed *out*-

Spiderwebs on the ceiling. Spiderwebs in his eyes. He closed them. They were wet and burning hot at the corners.

That day when the knocking came he ignored it. He hid like he'd hid on that last day, shirking from a Soldier's duty out of fear, out of cowardice. Oh, how regret could destroy a man. How bearing your heart to the one person who was worth it all could weaken even the proudest of Americans. Make him hate the battle he should go *gladly* marching into.

He wouldn't do it. He ripped the door open to stop the incessant knocking, and told her straight to her face he'd play no more of her games.

Three hours later, a bag over his head and his hands bound behind him, she had him shot out at the nearest gravel pit.

Well. That could have gone better.

The next Monday he did the smart thing and left immediately, planning to run for the wilds with nothing but his shotgun, the clothes on his back, and several cans of rations. He realized this did not include a can-opener about an hour walk into the range outside of Thunder Mountain, but it was too late to head back now. He wondered what would happen if he starved out here. After all, he'd already proven he couldn't die, respawn or no.

Maybe that's how she'd gotten all this up and running? Some sort of new respawn that instead of popping out a new you upon death, simply…rewound to a point where you were no longer dead.

These existential questions only vaguely played in the background of Soldier's mind as he kept walking, fading into a fatigue that was more than just hunger. His mind was worn thin, and as he stood on a peak he hadn't even realized he was ascending, he wondered when the last time was that he just…breathed. Filling his lungs with mountain air.

He missed being alive.

So he stopped walking after that. He laid down, and he hid, and he hoped that whatever grip her magic not-respawn had on him, it had some sort of range.

When he woke up the next morning, it was Monday.

Soldier got up. He showered. He ate breakfast out of a can and considered shaving; there wouldn't be much of a point, it'd always be that exact same level of scruff whether he did anything or not. He decided it was the principal of the thing, and picked up his razor.

At noon he nodded along to everything the Administrator said. On Tuesday, he went to work at BLU. He stood as he often did, Direct Hit on his shoulder, feet working anticipation into the hard dirt, waiting for the door to open and for Demo to come blinking out into the sunlight.

It opened and he did, his hand raised to block out the unrelenting shine of the desert and give him the chance to spy his prey. He did. And, for some odd reason, for the very first time, Soldier was close enough on this occasion that he could hear the battle cry as Demo came screaming in.

"*Lord forgive me! "*

He ran upward, deadly shield spike pointed forward, but Soldier didn't dodge away. He met the blow head on, maneuvering just enough space that he wouldn't be impaled. Their heads so close together, he asked, "why?"

The dark ferocity under Demo's muscles choked to a halt.

"Why?" Soldier repeated. "Why all of this? Why did you do this to me Tavish?"

Because it wasn't the Administrator haunting him, was it?

The muscles in Soldier's arms seized; refined in tactics and the threads of the world he might possess, but any training he put his body through was wiped away at the end of the week. Where the mind grew the flesh faltered. The spike lurched forward into Soldier's gut.

Surprise blinked over Demo's face, just like when Soldier had figured out how to disarm him for the first time. Now it was Soldier's turn to slump into his arms.

"Jane, wait, I didn't mean-"

The gray at the edge of his vision came on fast. He wasn't sure if the 'I'm sorry' he heard was imagined or not.

He could not lose, he could not win, nothing satisfied these unseen rules. But he couldn't hide either. Things had to play out, here in the badlands under sweat and duress. They met, again and again, but Soldier could *feel* how different it was, that neither of their hearts were in it. Days where they might kill each other, days when they might not. The week stretched on, and Soldier played his part.

“You…you *are* alright though, right lad?” Demo whispered once near the waning days, after declaring rather unconvincingly he had bested the Soldier once again.

The words reached Soldier’s ears and he stirred, blinking through oncoming death like it was the headlights of a train. A hand brushed his neck as the War grew further away.

That night, they met for the first time in centuries.

It felt that way to Soldier, though for Demo he knew it must have only been a few days. They hadn’t planned, they hadn’t *conspired*. They simply showed up, clambered up the grain elevator next to the point, and sat there.

“We did something like this once,” Soldier noted. “During that gravel tour we went on. We snuck away, and climbed up one of those big drills in the pits.”

Demo said nothing.

They sat there, swinging their legs over the edge. The moon was rising. Soldier said, “we are very good at tormenting each other.”

“That’s what happens when you decide to care about some bleeding idiot,” Demo said softly, looking at his boots against the redwashed ground below. “Give someone your heart, and there’s going to be this big hole in your side where it popped out of.”

"Hurts a hell of a lot when someone decides to give it back by shoving it through that same hole."

"Don't try to pin this all on me," Demo snarled.

Soldier chose not to hold on that hill. He advanced back down, and retreated into silence. He said, "I like my knife metaphor better."

“I never meant to-” Demo pivoted before losing moment halfway through the sentence. “We have to go through with this now, you know that right?”

“Better than you do, maggot.” Soldier wanted to sneer, but just the fact that Demo was looking at him again was almost more than he could bear. “But…I fucked this up first. I thought I was going crazy but I *knew* it wasn’t you.”

That caught Demo up short. And why wouldn’t it? He hadn’t lived the lives Soldier had, hadn’t had time to come to those realizations. But, even after all the time he’d had to think, Soldier still couldn’t figure one thing.

“Why?” he asked again. “Why are you holding up your end of this?”

“I…” Demo glanced away. Goddamn shame, enough that he wouldn’t tell Soldier when he needed to know it most. “Please, let’s just forget it. We don't have to know why, we just have to get through this. Then we go back. We have this.”

He reached out, trailing fingers on the back of Soldier’s neck. Soldier stiffened.

“Let’s just be alright,” he pleaded. Then he pulled Soldier’s head toward him, resting it there on his shoulder.

The moon rose higher.

“Alright,” Soldier said.

Midnight ticked over, and Soldier woke up screaming.

It was almost a quaint little repeat of his first visit from Her. He smashed every item in his home, overturning the furniture, tearing at the drywall until the meth addict downstairs banged on the ceiling and told him to shut up. He fell to his knees in the middle of the destruction and hollered anguish until his throat was raw.

No, *no* this wouldn’t be taken from him. He balled his fists and stared at the knot of wood closest to his nose, a dark brown dot in an otherwise swirling abyss. The grains moved around it, parting, but never moving it from where it was.

Soldier stood. He would not give in. A Soldier went to his defeat screaming bloody murder.

He knew where the mansion was, though he’d only ever been there once. The place was just as massive as he remembered, odd and ends of architecture that held no appeal to anyone but a demolitions man; an occupation dedicated to the art of collapsing. He wandered closer, getting hit in the shins with the automatic sprinklers, feeling oddly ambivalent about water in the desert.

The fountain though. That was the sort of thing that drew you in.

He heard Pauling before he saw her, ducking behind Odin’s looming form as he blotted out the rising sun. Purple—she was like the Administrator, Her lies and nothing more. He heard only the tail end of her offer, but he got the picture.

He made sure her little purple scooter was well beyond the limits of the property’s fence before making himself known. “Really? All for a damn bribe?”

Demo, who’d been holding out the Eyelander for glorious inspection, whipped around at the sound of Soldier’s voice. He drew the hilt closer to his chest, blade still pointed up, like he’d been caught sneaking a sweet treat he wasn’t supposed to have.

Behind his eye, his mind was doing obvious flips, trying to make sense of the Soldier’s appearance. “You- I-” The eye narrowed. “So. You here to do the job you backstabber?”

“That was all a crock of bull and you *know* it, DeGroot,” Soldier said without venom. He put his hands in his coat pockets. “Don’t sell the shit back to the man you bought it from.”

Again Demo’s expression danced around, trying to find an appropriate reaction, opening his mouth several times before ultimately glancing away. That shame again. Oh Tavish.

“I *need* this,” he said. “It’s not just a bribe. It’s about honor.”

“Wrong again maggot!” Soldier began to walk toward him. “It isn’t about the sword. It wasn’t about the contract. It was about *believing what they said when they handed it to you.* You were the one who taught me RED and BLU don’t mean crap. You were the one who wanted to be above it all. *So act like it*.”

“It’s not that easy-” Demo backpedaled.

Soldier lunged at him. Demo held the sword in front of him, but his eye was squeezed shut, head turned away. Soldier batted the blade aside with ease and grabbed Demo by the front of his shirt.

“AM I YOUR ENEMY TAVISH?”

Demo blinked his eye open. “I- I-”

“It’s a simple question. Am I your enemy? I don’t give a damn if you take the sword, I don’t give a damn if you kill me for the next week or not. They don’t *win* unless you decide they do.”

The sword point lowered, slowly at first, then dropped to the lawn altogether. “No…no Janey. You’re not my enemy. You…never.”

The hand, full of red fabric that’d looked so different when covered with this man’s blood instead of twisted in his shirt, loosened. It climbed higher holding Demo behind the neck. “Good. And don’t you forget it. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I still have a home invasion to deter.”

He left, back across the lawn, starting the next long trek back to his house. But the journey would be worth it. He filled his lungs, then let it all go.

A week later, a phone rang in the DeGroot mansion.

“Hello?” Demo said with a slowly mounting frustration only impeded by the sheer sleepiness around it.

“Tavish.” Soldier’s voice sounded in awe, like he could barely believe it. “Tavish, it’s 1am.”

“Aye? And is that time significant aside from the fact that I was sleeping through it?”

There was a long pause. A smile on the other side of the line. “No, I guess not. Are you sleeping right now?”

“*Obviously* not. I’m answering phone calls from my barmy best mate is what I’m doing.”

“Oh.” A slightly shorter pause. “Do you want to talk about your day?”

“You were *at* my day lad, we spent the whole time fighting each other. Kicking my arse too. Still don’t know how you always manage to be two steps ahead of me.”

“Army man’s secret.” Soldier scratched his chin. “I uh…got some boots. As my prize for winning the War.”

“Ah. That’s nice.” For a moment, there was a line between them made up of more than a pair of curling phone cords. If you were to ask either of them, though, they wouldn’t be able to say what. “Do you…want to tell me about them?”

Soldier did. With glee, he launched into an explanation of splash damage and explosive thrust, and neither he nor Demo stopped grinning for the rest of the night.

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