

# Atonement

“Ye want to know my story?” Rumbled the large man sitting across the dirty tavern table.

His workman’s hands paused in their task of polishing his longsword, as his dark eyes examined me. “Don’t think anyone’s ever asked me that.”

I fidgeted nervously with my napkin. “Well of course. I mean, it’s not every day that a stranger saves you from a bandit raid, and I must admit to a... professional curiosity about the magic you were using. I’ve never seen anything quite like it.”

“Impressed ye, did I?” the man smirks as, with a gesture and a word, he conjures forth arcane... or maybe divine energy, in the form of some sort of spirt-sword, glowing a harsh blue-white.

“Let me think about it for a moment...”

He closes his eyes, contemplation dominating his craggy face.

He opens his eyes. “Okay,” he says, “First thing you gotta know about me is that I wasn’t always a good man. Back in the day, they called me names like “butcher”, “soldier”, and “monster”.

And I earned those names, earned them with blood and blades.”

Our eyes locked. “Now, don’t think that I was some sort of sicko, killing because it got me off.

No, I had a cause, a purpose. See, the city I grew up in had this church, The Children of the Blood. And the Children were powerful. Not just politically, though make no mistake, they called the shots. No, full Clerics of the Blood had all sorts of powers, from strength that you wouldn’t believe, to a certain way of talking that just... got in your head. They could make you do things.”

“...”

“They made me do things. See, sometimes they had people they wanted killed. And sometimes, they didn’t want to send a full Cleric to put those people in the ground. So they’d ask me to do it. And you always did what the Children asked.”

I blinked. “Er, you don’t have to share more if- “

He kept talking, plowing through my objections. “Now, eventually, the Children were overthrown, some sect of dragon-worshippers found them out and burned them to ash, that part’s not important. What’s important is that the scale-botherers locked me up, for obvious reasons, and were debating what to do with me. I thought that they’d cut off my head and be done with me, but instead...”

For a moment, this boulder of a man falters, and then a slow, soft smile spreads across his face, like the sun coming up from behind a mountain.

“Instead he came to me. A man in armour not much taller than you, with green eyes that held this... this peace, like he saw all of you, and despite it all he accepted you, loved you, even. At least, I thought he was a man, at first, but... gods, it’s hard to describe, even now. It was like my vision split when looking at him, one side seeing the green-eyed knight, and the other seeing an angel carved of light, with scales and horns that sprouted from his head like a crown.” “And he spoke to me, this angel in a man’s skin. “Bernard Armstrong,” he said, “I offer you a second chance. You have done terrible things, but they were not of your own will. Take my offer, and be free.”

I looked at him, at it, and... you might think me foolish, but the only words that came to my lips were “Who are you?”

The angel smiled at me “My name isn’t important, for now, just call me Hierophant. But that’s not really your question, is it? What I am, is a second chance. I am the bell-chime of freedom,

the chain of duty, the Dragon's Herald. Besides, there's a more important question to ask, Bernard." And he looked at me with those knowing green eyes.

Somehow, I knew what he was getting at. "What... what do I have to do, Hierophant?"

"Help people."

"What?"

"It's that simple. I'm offering you a second chance, and a measure of my power. In exchange, all you must do is help people, be the shield of the innocent, a balm for the sick and guide for the lost."

"Why are you doing this? What's in it for you?"

And the angel, he sighed. In that moment, he was just a man, a tired man who'd heard that sentiment too many times.

"What's in it for me, as you put it, is the betterment of the mortal races' lot, a soldier who truly wants to defend people, not take advantage of them. As for why..." Another sigh. "I've been where you are, Benard, and I know how to spot regret. You think that you're a monster? When I was young, I slaughtered innocents, too many, and with far less cause than you. I nearly lost myself in violence and the joy of blood. But still, I was given a second chance, for reasons I still don't understand. Take the deal, Bernard. Let me pay it forward."

I thought about it for a long time. I suppose that some part of me thought that I deserved whatever punishment came my way."

"But you took the deal, obviously."

"I'm here, ain't I? Somehow, he knew when I came to a decision, and reached out his hand. I took it and suddenly it felt like I had grabbed hot iron! I pulled back my hand, and... well, take a look."

He held his palm out, facing towards me, and there I saw a scar, a burn scar, in the shape of a dragon seen from above.

“I cried out, and the guards took notice. When they saw the mark... next thing I knew, I was a free man, with a brand-new sword and some nice clothes. I started wandering, honoring Hierophant’s deal, and I haven’t stopped. Been about... 4 years now.”

“Have you met this... Hierophant since then?”

“Not as such, but... sometimes I see a glimpse of those knowing green eyes in a crowd, and feel... warmth, I suppose.”

“And what, you just wandering around, saving people from bandits now?”

“Oh, not just bandits. Sometimes I get a feeling that I need to go somewhere, and when I do, I usually find something to help with. Some poor sick family, or a tyrant in need of justice, once or twice even another chapter of the Children.”

I was silent for a long time, taking in this man’s story. I wasn’t sure I believed it, truth be told, but he did save me...

“Can I buy you another drink, friend?”

I got a smile in return.