

The Old Soldier

by Marilyn Reeves

He leans shakily on his cane as he shuffles up the aisle approaching the curtain, in front of which is seated a panel of judges in long, flowing robes. One by one, as their numbers are called, the people step forward to be interviewed. The judges take a moment to discuss each case amongst themselves and then pronounce their verdict. Some of the supplicants can be heard begging and pleading as they are dragged by armed guards to the exit on the left. A few, with relief and gratitude on their faces, are led by smiling women to the one on the right.

The old soldier's pain is almost unbearable now and he wishes he could sit down, but the crowd presses him forward. He turns to look back at his friends who have come to see him off. One or two have tears in their eyes. He wants to tell them how frightened he is, and how sad. But they already know, and they are sad for him. And for themselves.

"So, today's the big day," he says to himself. "I knew it was coming, just didn't know when."

Most of those standing in line are elderly, some of them old veterans like himself. And a few younger ones, minus an arm or a leg – wounded in battle but defeated by trying to adjust to life back home.

There are also a few children. The starved, the neglected. The unwanted. Teenagers with track marks on their arms, giving up before their lives have even begun. And one beautiful young girl obviously stricken with some terrible affliction. So sad!

He plans to plead with the judges to let him go back and start again. Not to the very beginning, but to when he was 19 and first joined the Army. "I was so full of energy and idealism then! I just wanted to serve my country and make the world a better place. Kill a few of the bad guys. Teach them a lesson." But then he remembers the face of one of those "bad guys" who didn't look all that much different from himself. Who also just wanted to serve his country. "I ended his life ... and for what? It didn't change the world. We've just moved on to the next round with new hatreds, new prejudices. New faces to replace the ones of those who have gone before. The battles I fought during my years in the service – Germany, Korea, Viet Nam – all but forgotten history by now. These days the enemy is waging war on airplanes and in shopping malls. How can you defeat a hidden enemy like that?"

"Oh no. They're calling my number. I don't want to do this. I don't want to go ... it's too soon! Well, buck up, Old Soldier, just one last battle to fight and then you can lay down your weapons. Then you can rest. I wonder ... do they give medals for bravery in Heaven?"