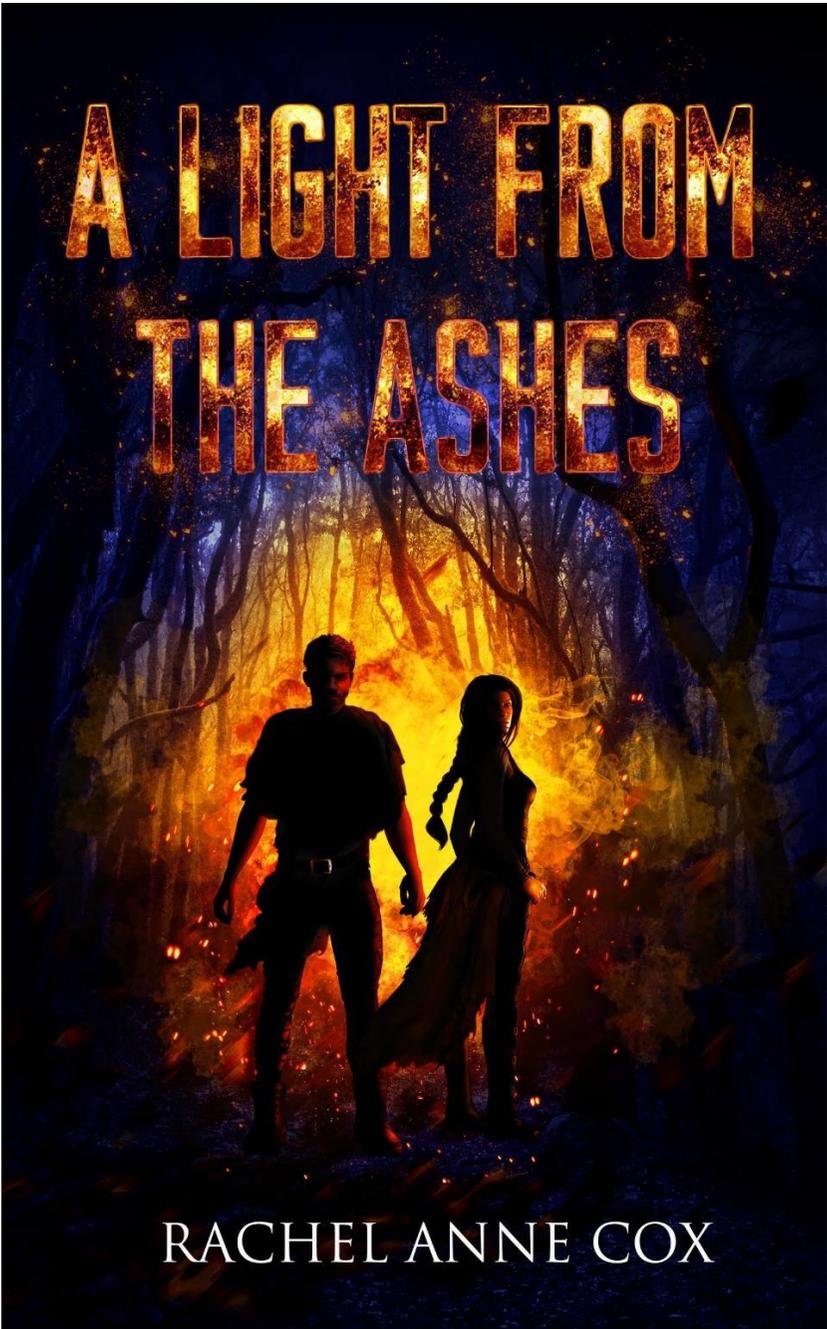


A LIGHT FROM THE ASHES



RACHEL ANNE COX

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The people, places, and events described in this book are fictitious. Any similarities to anyone living, dead, or undead, is purely coincidental.

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*For Gibs, who showed me the light
when all I saw were the ashes.
And for Jen and Steven, who helped
me keep the fire going.*

PART I

1

BEFORE

Somewhere in Virginia

The Year of 42

The scarred land and verdant forest looked brighter to Sam through the lens of freedom, even in the pre-storm gray light. Silver-backed leaves flipped their personalities with the waves of the wind. Now green, now silver. And his eyes danced to follow them. The monotony of the last seven years had blended his days into beige sawdust. Still, seven years wasn't too long to work for the woman he loved and earn the right to put his mother's ring on her finger. That kind of joy demanded a sacrifice.

Patches of sun were torn out of the shade. From the tangled jumble of trees and vines as he made his way home, Sam saw a flash of white out of the corner of his eye. Two skeletons lay out in the open, entwined and held in strange poses by creeping blackberry vines thick with thorns. They lay across the edge of the forest, partially in the adjacent meadow as if they were trying to run away from something but had fallen just short of escape. He approached them slowly, blanched bones of broken lives and interrupted dreams. He wondered, as he always did when he came across similar remains, what their story had been. He could not rest until he'd taken care of them. This was as good a place as any for a burial.

He pulled the small shovel from his pack to dig the two graves. The

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clean hiss of the spade in the dirt sounded and felt as if the earth would swallow the shovel up, and him along with it. Hiss. Lift. A clump of earth and roots thudded and thwapped on the ground. Sam felt and heard the rhythm, willing himself not to break it. The rhythm, the pattern, they held him in check, but the sounds didn't quite drown out the echoes of war still ringing in Sam's ears, sounds he was never quite free of.

Rifle fire in the trees beyond the meadow splits the air. Sam no longer jumps at the sound. It peppers his consciousness just as the crickets used to. He listens closely as the cracking sounds fall away, farther and farther from his hidden spot in the alders. Sweet vernal grass tickles his legs, the dew sticking the leaves to his torn shins. He loses track of how long he is crouched over the body of his friend. The blood and muck where he'd fallen now pasting his clothes in stiff swaths of torn fabric. As the air becomes thick and quiet around them, Sam pulls out his knife to begin digging a grave. He grips the leather handle, blackened with sweat, until his knuckles are white. In the trackless forest, he searches to find a spot clear of trees and roots. The sky becomes gray with rain, and he tries to quell the sickness rising in his throat. He can't look at the lifeless body of his friend taken down by a bullet. He keeps thinking the boy will rise as if he'd been sleeping and take off running into the trees as he used to. Sam bunkers over the hole he's forming, tearing the carpet of leaves and grasses from the earth with one hand, fiercely wiping the tears from his cheeks with the other.

Sam couldn't remember the name of his young friend, another child soldier—he was only the first of many Sam would see fall around him. And he didn't know the names of the bodies he was now burying. The task struck him as strangely intimate for strangers. Touching the bones of bodies that had been actual people, determining their final resting place. What made him worthy of such a task? Maybe it wasn't about worthiness. Maybe it was about availability. Within a half hour, the job was done, a shallow grave being sufficient for their bones left behind. He reached in his small pack for *Great Expectations*, where he'd scribbled some words in the front cover in his own hand.

"Ashes to ashes, dust to dust. The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: He leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil. Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the universe, the True Judge. This is also for the good. May all be free from sorrow and the causes of sorrow; may all never

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be separated from the sacred happiness which is sorrowless. From untruth lead us to Truth. From darkness lead us to Light. From death lead us to Immortality. Amen."

Sam didn't understand fully what the words meant. They were abstractions to him, unrelated to anything he could see or touch, but still they gave him comfort. He knew that the people of Before had found great comfort in these words. He'd read their religious texts and knew their deeply held beliefs had even led to wars. Somehow for him, pulling the words together from their different religions made him feel he was helping them find peace, and in doing so, he found his own. Maybe this was what they called God—this peace and space between.

Kneeling by the grave, he kissed his hand and touched the stone he'd found to mark the grave. "Rest well, my friends. I thank you for your sacrifice." He'd lost count of how many he had buried through his travels. But he'd promised himself long ago that every lost soul he encountered would receive a proper burial and his thanks.

As his final day at the lumber work camp had ended that afternoon, he was left with a strange sense of emptiness and anticipation. His days had been filled with other people's needs and orders for too long. He knew within a day he'd be seeing Gemma again—he had worked and waited for nothing else every day for seven years. So, why then was he now almost frightened of the reunion? True, he hadn't actually received any response to his letters throughout the seven years, but with the haphazard carrier system being what it was, there could be a thousand reasons for that.

Sam had left the lumber camp near the Border to go on one last scavenging trip before heading home. He needed another book and thought he might find something for Gemma as well. He was lucky to still have his treasured copy of *Great Expectations*. When the Corsair sergeant had found him the night before retrieving his books from the hidden box under the third tree from his tent, Sam had been sure he would lose everything.

He'd been so careful. Everyone was in the mess tent, eating dinner. He'd looked over his shoulder a hundred times to make sure he wasn't followed. The small wooden box was in a shallow hole nestled among the tangled roots of an alder. He'd covered the hole with a large patch of soft green mold so no one would see the earth disturbed. The hinges had creaked and protested as he opened the box to reveal his few linen packed books. He had tucked *Great Expectations* between his jacket and tunic. He

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breathed a little easier, feeling the worn cover and heft of it close to him.

He tenuously fingered the pages of the other two volumes—a book of Irish poetry from the 1900s and Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms*. The familiar smell of musty paper and ancient binding overcame his senses as he sat breathing them in. Moon-cast shadows danced over the words as the wind rustled the pages.

“Samuel Erikson!” The grating of the Corsair’s voice had shot through his spine like a steel rod, and the two books in his hands fell to the ground.

“What’s this?” The soldier strained his tight blue uniform as he bent to retrieve what Sam had dropped. “The day before you are to leave, and we find this contraband.”

“Sir, I can explain . . .”

“Silence!”

Sam felt the bulge of *Great Expectations* under his coat and hoped the soldier didn’t see it. He knew this sergeant as one of the more fair Corsairs, as Corsairs went. Perhaps his punishment wouldn’t be so bad.

“It seems we have a choice to make, Erikson. If I bring you to the commandant, you’ll likely serve another six months here.”

Sam’s jaw tightened, and he felt beads of sweat breaking out on his forehead.

“You were in this camp before I arrived. Remind me how long your service has been.”

“Seven years, sir. It started out as two.”

“Bad behavior?”

“I wasn’t given a reason, sir.”

The sergeant looked around as if he wished someone else were there to tell him what to do. He was used to following orders.

“Right, then, Erikson. Either we take you to the commandant, or you throw these books on the fire. Which is it to be?”

Sam’s shoulders relaxed without him thinking about it. “You’re giving me a choice?”

“Only if you make it in the next five seconds. One . . .”

The sergeant stood before him, pistol in one hand, books in the other. Sam couldn’t see his face clearly in the dark but sensed he wasn’t enjoying his task.

“Two . . .”

Trying to strain to see the books in the soldier’s hands, Sam wished he

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could have read them one last time before being faced with this choice. But he knew what his answer had to be.

“Three . . .”

“I’ll throw them on the fire.”

“Follow me, then.”

They’d walked in single file to the fire just outside Sam’s tent. It was beginning to smolder into coals. The sergeant took a large stick and stoked the fire into life. Tiny bits of burning ash rising up into the blackened night.

“Here you go, Erikson. Now, throw them in.”

Sam held them in his hands for a brief second. Relishing the feel of the hard covers beneath his fingers. Any longer than a second, and he would have started to question his decision. In one swift movement, the books were out of his hands, being swallowed up in the burning embers.

As he thought back to the night before, he felt a hole in the pit of his stomach, and ache for the words and ideas lost in the flames. His skin itched with a layer of the fine saw dust. He ran his hand through his thick mop of sandy curls, then along his rough cheek. He tried to think of Gemma, his reason for every decision he’d made for as long as he could remember.

He thought of the creek which he would pass on his way home. Though he’d had some leaves of absence from the lumber camp—most of them spent on scavenging trips in the Forbidden Grounds—he had not been allowed in his own village until his seven years were up. He wondered if the creek still followed the same path.

Vines of memories as thick as the underbrush at his feet followed him through the forest. He thought of Gemma’s long brown hair falling around her shoulders, her skin darkened by the sunlight as they played in the creek together, hiding from the kind but watchful eyes of Zacharias. She was the only bright spot in his life then and now. They had clung to each other in those first few years after Zacharias took them in after finding them stealing food in the town square. Gemma was the only beauty he’d ever seen in this world.

She would be changed some, he was sure, as he was changed, his thin arms now bulky with muscle hard-earned in the Virginia forest cutting an average of two cords of wood per day, hands calloused and worn. But she would be lovely still, and more importantly, she would be his. They would hold each other in a warmth protecting them from the descending winter.

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He would love her in the breathing in and the breathing out, sharing the same air and all else. He would smile at her over breakfast in the mornings, the coffee steam from their two cups blending between them.

And now he was on his way back to her. It used to be easy enough to slip past the Border guards. Although their stations weren't far apart, Sam remembered how often he had found the guards napping. The days of revolutionary armies and border raiders were long gone. He'd found a few of the guards easy to feign friendship with and bribe with alcohol he found in demolished bars in the Forbidden Grounds.

The roads outside the Border still showed remnants of the past before the Disaster and lay as crumbled and broken reminders of things that no longer existed. Within Virginia, the Triumvirate had ordered that roads be cleared and reverted back to dirt paths, easier on the feet of men and horses. But outside the Border, the asphalt roads looked like black icebergs among the encroaching trees. Sam usually found it easier to walk beside the decrepit roads than on them.

On this particular day, he had walked toward the ocean. Ancient ~~rusted~~ rusted-out cars littered the roadway, tires and all useful pieces of them long since removed. He'd taken this road enough times to know he'd find nothing of value until he reached the place he called New Beach. Sam had breathed in the freedom in the crisp autumn air. No more schedules, no more assigned days off. Day after day of freedom stretched out before him, and he reveled in the luxury of it. Feet crunching in the fallen leaves the only sound, no other person for miles.

The road had turned southeast through the forest, which for years had been left unchecked. There he'd found the bodies as he took in the sights around him, the trees tall and untouched by man, the underbrush encircling his feet like a pool of green dappled with orange and red. The edge of the woods had receded. Others had been here and cut some of the trees down. Saws, not axes. He was used to seeing trees with axe-cut notches from other scavengers in need of wood for their fires or shelter. A tree here or there, hewn down awkwardly and dragged through the brush. But a group had done this, not an individual.

Sam took another look at the shallow grave he was leaving behind, then made his way down the hill to the waves lapping around the buildings in New Beach. The signs were long since destroyed, so he could only guess what the city used to be called, whose streets now flowed with seawater.

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He scanned the horizon, finding the city library just above the waves, only the top floor untouched by water. Sam picked his way over fallen walls, bricks, and chunks of cement in piles. He saw the waves flowing in and out around the buildings. Were they farther inland since his last visit?

Sam thought of a line he'd read from Emerson and played over and over in his thoughts every time he saw the Forbidden Grounds, like a song that ran in his mind unbidden. “. . . *universal essence, which is not wisdom, or love, or beauty, or power, but all in one, and each entirely, is that for which all things exist, and that by which they are; that spirit creates; that behind nature, throughout nature, spirit is present.*”

He wondered if that was true, and wondered again about the nature of the world, the nature of creativity. He couldn't quite grasp it. What creativity rested beneath the waves around his feet. What glories and forgotten dreams of those gone before him? Sam wondered just how many lives had passed in the streets beneath him *en masse*, how many had intersected, combined, created, grown, and multiplied before the final rush of water washed them from the earth and all became still, silent, separated again.

He was able to reach the library via a high wall which reached from the dry land, then through the seawater like a tight rope. From the wall, he climbed into an open window on the fourth floor of the withered library. Rows of books in the dusty rays of what was left of the sunlight stretched before him. He wouldn't have time to really search as he would like to. He passed the shelves he'd already been through. Here and there a gull perched on a copy of Keats or commiserated with Lee's mockingbird. These were books he'd read often in his travels, but he only brought back his absolute favorites, as hiding places had been scarce at the lumber camp. Now, perhaps he could bring home a few more. He passed by King's *Salem's Lot* and Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye*. Although he had read them, he couldn't count himself as fond of them. Gemma would like *To Kill a Mockingbird*, he was sure. He'd written to her about it the first time he read it. She reminded him of the young, precocious Scout, though with a protective armor which the naive Scout never needed.

He scanned the shelves, trying to find volumes with the least amount of damage. Whole sections were pasted with white salt deposits. The choking stench of mold almost overwhelmed his senses. Books stood swathed in the black, creeping growths. Some without mold simply fell

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apart in his hands. As he reached for what appeared to be the last copy of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, several shiny black beetles and silverfish scurried from beneath it. On the shelf in its space, insects and two brown salamanders writhed in liberation. He held his breath, hoping they had not devoured the inside of the book. As it began to come apart in his hands, Sam sighed with disappointment. He would have to find another. Lists of books Zacharias had told him about scrolled through his head. He tried to think of one Gemma would like. Was *Little Women* one Z had mentioned? Yes, he was sure that it was, so he quickly went to find it.

Sam ached to stay longer, to be able to linger over the books he loved. But he kept looking over his shoulder to make sure he wouldn't be caught by a Corsair patrol or other scavengers. Something in Sam always wanted to believe the best of people, but he never trusted anyone he met in the Forbidden Grounds, and there were more patrols in the Forbidden Grounds in the past months than there had ever been before. He quickly placed the book in his knapsack, first wiping the pages free of salt and dust. He paused longingly in front of the shelf of Steinbeck before forcing himself back to the window and his wall of escape.

Standing just at the water's edge, Sam turned the ring on his little finger absentmindedly, a gold ring which seemed to hold the fire of the noon day sun. The ring his father had given his mother, and before that his grandfather to his grandmother. It was the only small connection he felt to any happiness in the past, and soon it would be a connection to Gemma and the happiness of the future. His heart was starting to beat faster every time he thought about returning home and seeing Gemma's face, her blue eyes filled with tears. He wondered if it was anticipation or fear of finding her gone. Shadows of clouds crawled slowly up the mountain side while cold came down to wash over him like his fear. He tried to squelch the nervousness that was growing like a weed in his stomach. By tomorrow at sunset, he'd be there. Tomorrow.

For tonight, he had to find a place to make camp. Looking skyward, he saw the clouds blowing inland, a fall storm looking for a place to land. All of the living things were scurrying for cover ahead of the approaching storm. A raccoon ducked under a sea of elephant ears. Sam just glimpsed the end of his tail before he disappeared. A turtle moved slowly across his path, stopping, listening, changing course, going as fast as he could go. Sam would have to build a lean-to of branches and leaves quickly if he

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hoped to stay dry.

* * * * *

Sophie woke in darkness, hearing a scream and recognizing it as her own. She lay still for several moments, jaw clenched, back rigid. She imagined the muscles in her body from top to bottom, willing them to relax and release her piece by piece, trying to calm her breathing. Her fingers found their way to a lock of hair at her forehead, twirling it as she often did to still her mind. She felt like a hot coal thrown out of a fire into the freezing night. Long minutes passed, and her heart continued to race.

The dream was the same—it was always the same. A man holds her by the throat against a tree, his face merely an inch from hers. She struggles for breath, his hands squeezing tighter, fingers bruising her skin. Suddenly a knife is sheathed under his ribs as the darkness closes in. Gulping in the lost air, she falls next to him, her hand on the ground in his blood when he grabs her by the hair, pulling her head down hard upon the ground. She

always hoped the dream would end differently, hoped to redirect the actions in her brain. But every night she was helpless to the tide of dreamed events.

Knowing it would be at least an hour before she'd find sleep again, Sophie climbed out of the bed and pulled on her threadbare robe, which had lost its lavender luster years before, now a matted gray. Still chilled, she went down the hall to check on her daughter. She tried to tiptoe lightly, but the wood floor creaked under her bare feet, the sound shocking her as much as the cold floor, just as she reached her daughter's door. She listened first, and hearing no stirrings within, opened the door. Bridget's breathing was slow and steady. The child held tightly to her scrap of a blanket she'd carried for the four years since she was a baby but had flung herself out of the covers in her sleep. Sophie pulled the several quilts over her, tucking them under her chin. Moving as slowly as possible, she buried her face in her daughter's curls on the pillow, breathing in her scent slowly. Ending her nightly ritual, she softly kissed each eyelid as Bridget took in one quick breath and then settled into the arms of sleep again.

Sophie's feet found their own way to the kitchen through the darkened house. She stopped at the kitchen sink and looked absently out the window to the softly glowing fires along the benches below the mountain, tiny

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points of light in the looming darkness. Her own dying fire was a mix of orange and black embers in the kitchen fireplace before she stirred them back to life. The full moon cast its light through the thin curtains, making the white sink almost glow before her. She pulled the ladle from the water bucket to fill her glass. Her fingers found the charm of the butterfly necklace—a remnant from her sister and a past life—twisting and playing with its wings absently. Often in her midnight wanderings, she would wish for her sister’s company, a comfort she would never have again. The images of her dream started to fade as she gulped the water, washing down the fear. The process both a cleansing and a redemption.

Sounds of tiny scratches and scurrying from the corner assaulted her ears, quickening her heartbeat again. Sophie turned quickly to see the firelight reflected in two tiny glowing eyes under the edge of the china cabinet. She set her glass down silently before eyeing the culprit—a crouching gray rat. She grabbed the first thing she could get her hands on, a kitchen knife resting near the sink. Though her throw was swift, and her aim was true, the squeaking rodent evaded her attempt on his life. She took up the knife from the floor in frustration but cut her hand by grabbing too quickly in the dark.

“Damn!” she whispered under her breath. A resentment filled her for having to clean up the blood dripping from her palm. She wished she wasn’t so used to the sight and smell of blood. At times it had seemed to pervade too much of her life—blood flowing to swim beneath the garden symphony of moonlight, heaving whispers languid with red screams, revealing her thousand frantic dreams. Sophie found herself trying to remember when blood had still frightened her. Perhaps that time had never existed. Too young, she’d learned to fight for her survival. Too young, her parents’ blood had been spilled.

After wrapping her hand with a clean bandage she pulled from the first-aid cabinet, she walked outside. She was tired but restless. The cold air coming down from the mountains was refreshing in her lungs while also making Sophie want to retreat back to the comfort of her quilted bed. She took several deep breaths, wrapping her arms and robe more tightly around herself. She thought of her family again, as she always did after waking from nightmares. She thought of them slumbering beneath the sod somewhere to the west. Did the moonlight wash over their graves as it now washed over her? How would her life be different now if Laurie had

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survived? She wondered if they would sit on a porch swing somewhere together, watching their children play together in a garden. Bridget had never had other children to play with. Sophie mourned a future that had never been allowed to take its first breath.

The sharp smell of smoke in the air was often a comfort during her late-night rambles. It reminded her she was not alone in the world. But her own arms around her waist were a poor substitute for the arms of another.

* * * * *

A little boy sat shivering in his damp clothes as he hid in the bushes out of the line of sight of the border guards. He knew he'd be able to get back across the Border farther down away from the guard station, but he hadn't found much food in the last few days, and his legs were feeling weak. He struggled to stay awake, knowing he needed to get to the creek for water. More than anything, he needed water. He still couldn't believe he'd knocked over the cup he set out to catch the rainwater the night before. Now he'd not be able to get a drink until he reached the creek. Not unless—he turned his face upwards, catching the first few raindrops falling into his mouth. They offered him little relief from his thirst. He was just about to make a run for it when he saw the man with the knapsack approaching the guard station. The boy instinctively crouched lower in the bushes.

“Hold up there, sir,” the guard called out, holding his rifle across his chest. “What’s your business here?”

“Well, Harry, I’ll tell ya. A little of this, a little of that,” the man reached in his pack, pulling out an amber colored bottle. “More this than that.” He handed the bottle to the guard.

“Sam! It’s been a while. Too long, I’d say.” The guard gratefully took the bottle from his friend as he set his gun down. “Missed you around here. But mostly I’ve missed this,” he chuckled.

“Now you pace yourself with that one, Harry. I’ve picked the bar clean and don’t know when I’ll find another one.”

“But you will, though. Join me for a drink?”

“Nah, I’ve got to get back. Haven’t seen Gemma in a while.”

“Your seven years up already?”

“Yeah. Gotta get back and surprise her unless she’s been counting the

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days like I have.”

“Good luck, my friend. And thanks for this!”

Sam forced himself to shake hands with the guard before passing through the gates. “Remember, take it slow,” he called over his shoulder. As he rounded a curve in the road, he wiped his hand on his pants.

The boy waited for the guard to take his bottle inside the guard shack and snuck quietly through the gates. The man called Sam interested him. He had supplies and ways of moving in and out of the Border he hadn’t witnessed before. Surely, he’d have food as well. Dinner would come for the boy in the middle of the night while Sam slept.

* * * * *

The walking wind wandered into the stone night with hardly a rustle after the earlier storm. Sam sat in front of the fire, flipping the fish he’d caught an hour before. He was only hours away from home but had to stop for the night. The wet branches smoked more than he would have liked, but then he’d always liked the taste of smoked fish anyway.

“Be sure to give the line enough slack,” his father used to say. *“Don’t pull at it too quickly. Gotta let the little devil think he’s gotten away with something.”* Then his dad would pat his shoulder. *“This is the good stuff, son. Remember that.”*

Sam had heard the boy following him for the past few miles. The first time he’d heard the movement behind him, his heart had jumped into his chest, thinking a patrol was after him, or maybe that he’d be pulled back into working in the lumber camp. It wasn’t unheard of for Corsairs to allow someone to hope for escape, only to drag them back. But whoever it was seemed to stumble every few steps. Not likely a Corsair. After a few miles, Sam had trudged up a rise in the land where he could glance back behind him unnoticed. A small boy, maybe ten in ragged clothes, with dark hair matted on his forehead. Sam had slowed his gait to let him keep up. He heard and saw him drinking from the creek where he’d caught the fish. Sam wanted to help him but figured the boy would speak to him when he was ready. He now looked down at the fish in the fire. Just about done. The boy had still not made his presence known.

“There’s plenty here for two,” he called out, still staring into the fire.

No answer.

“You must be hungry. We’ve walked quite a ways today.”

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The boy stepped tentatively into the firelight.

“Come get some fish, boy. Pretty good, if I do say so myself.”

The boy held his hands out. Sam took his own plate and handed it to him. Within a minute or two, the boy had polished off the fish, breathing quickly between bites as if he thought the food would disappear before him.

“What’s your name?”

He continued to chew and breathe heavily. His eyes closed, enjoying every hurried bite.

“You have one?”

“Ethan,” he finally responded.

“Ethan, I’m Sam. Where you from?”

Ethan looked puzzled.

“Where do you live?”

“Around. Woods mostly. Sometimes cabins.”

“Family?”

“Hard to remember. Mom and Dad have been gone a long time. The Corsairs took them. I was maybe four or five, I think.” It was a common enough story that Sam had heard too often.

“You must be at least ten now. Who’s been taking care of you all this time?”

“There were others like me. We traveled together for a while. But they started stealing things—not food—fighting, using weapons on people. I tried to stop them. Then one morning, I woke up, and they were gone. Been on my own since.”

“When was that?”

“Two, three weeks maybe?”

“Well come and sit down at least. You look worn out.”

Ethan hesitated. He wondered if he could trust this man who was so friendly with the border guards.

“Come on now, boy. You’ve nothing to fear from me.”

There was something behind Sam’s green eyes, some kind of knowing and kindness that softened Ethan’s defenses. His worn out limbs forced him to soften the rest.

“Pretty tired I guess.” The boy sat on a large rock near the fire.

“You can share my camp tonight if you like, that is if you promise not to steal from me.”

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“I don’t steal things,” the boy seemed offended by the comment.

“Oh yeah, that’s right.” Sam chuckled. “Well, come on now. Here’s some bread to go with the fish. A few days old, but still good.”

Ethan practically inhaled that as well.

“You’re a regular Lost Boy, aren’t you?”

“I’m not lost.” Another bite. “I know where I am.”

“No, it’s from an old story,” Sam explained. The Lost Boys lived in Neverland and followed around another boy named Peter Pan who could never grow up. They fought Captain Hook and the pirates.”

“What are pirates?”

“Long ago they roamed the seas, pillaging and stealing from any vessel they encountered. In the story of Peter Pan, he’s the cause of Captain Hook losing his hand, so the captain is always seeking vengeance.”

Ethan’s eyes lit up with wonder and renewed energy from the nourishment as he listened to the pirate stories.

“If you’re going to follow me, I guess that makes me Peter Pan.” Sam smiled to himself. “I kind of like that.”

As the evening wore on, with their bellies full of fish, the two new friends looked out over the darkened valley toward the mountains not far to the west. Tiny points of orange light dotted the landscape, fires like stars draped across the valley.

“Sam?”

“Hmm?”

“Do you ever wonder what it was like Before?”

“Sometimes.”

“What do you think it was like?”

“I’ve talked to some of the Old Ones about it. My adopted father, Zacharias, lived Before. He’s told me a few things.”

“Will you tell me?”

The fire popped and hissed between them. Sam squinted to see the boy through the flames.

“Many people died in the Disaster. We can’t say precisely how many. All means of calculating the loss or communicating it were destroyed. Only a surge of sound, a blinding light and then immediate darkness, as if some giant switch were flipped that turned off the world.”

“What’s a switch?”

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“They used to have buttons that could turn a light on and off by just flipping it.”

“Like a lighting a match?”

“Not exactly. The Old Ones talk of how it was before the darkness. Before the switch was flipped. They remember times when the electricity in their houses would temporarily go out. There was a silence that would come over a house when it didn’t have electricity coursing through it like blood, making the machines run like a pumping heart.”

“I wish I could see a machine. And hear one. What else happened?”

“Before the final silence, the storms had grown in number and intensity with only days in between, then hours, then seconds, blending into one great storm with no foreseeable ending. Animals had stopped exhibiting their signs of warning before the storms, they were so overwhelmed.”

“And after?”

“After the Disaster, everything just stopped as if the whole earth had stopped spinning on its axis. People and animals alike walked more quietly for a time. Those who had to speak only spoke in whispers, afraid to be the first to crack the eerie silence. It was more silent than any they had ever heard before, and the darkness blacker than the night sky. This greater darkness that covered the land was more than the absence of light. People became like children stumbling with no points of reference. So, they started building fires. Eventually, it came to be that every household would light a fire either in their houses or outside, for cooking, heating water, staying warm. And then the darkness was lighted only by the fires of survival in those left alive as it is now.”

Ethan saw Sam looking intently at the valley. He appeared to be searching for something. “What are you looking at?” the boy asked.

“I’m watching for her fire.”

“Whose?”

“Gemma’s, the girl I’m going back to meet.”

“How can you tell which one is hers? There are so many fires in the valley.”

“Hers is different.” Sam took a deep breath, and Ethan waited for him to finish his thought.

“Ever since we were children, she always started her fire before anyone else—before it was even dusk. And her fire always seemed to be larger and brighter than it needed to be.”

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“So you just look for the bigger fire? Still, it must be hard to spot it from this distance.”

“Any time I’m out in the woods like this, I can’t sleep until I see her fire. Even when I was at the lumber camp, sometimes I’d climb up in a tree after dinner, and look over the valley to see it. There’s solace in it, I suppose.”

“Have you ever had a sleepless night, Sam?”

“Many, boy. But never for lack of finding her fire.”

2

HOME COMING

Another sunrise pierced Sophie's tired eyes, her sleepless night blending into an early morning. She'd seen too many sunrises lately. Standing at her bedroom window, she gazed at the fog rising from the fields, a blanket colder than the bed she'd left behind. In the glint of early morning, a ray of sunlight caught the faded red flag raised from the side of the old mailbox at the end of the drive. Another message.

Her heart beat faster, wondering what her task would be this time. She had been a member of the Watch since she'd come to Boswell. Just as their name implied, the small band of people from the surrounding villages watched government officials and activities, reporting to each other on Corsair army troop movements, changes of guard stations, or any other matters of interest or concern. But in recent months, as more Corsairs arrived in the villages, and an added strictness to the law started to prevail, the Watch captains had decided it was time to increase their subversive activity. Sabotage became the order of the day. Though their efforts were small and merely a nuisance at first, with each successive attack, they gained confidence and momentum.

As children of revolutionaries, the blood of rebellion ran hot in their veins even more than a decade after the end of the Second Revolution. Each had lost someone to the Triumvirate's harsh punishments after the war, and some had lost everything. Sophie was no different. It was the memory of those she'd lost which fueled her actions and stilled her nerves.

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No matter what her captain would ask of her, she knew she'd comply willingly.

Listening carefully at Bridget's door to make sure she was still asleep, Sophie walked barefoot in the cool, dewy grass out to the edge of the road to retrieve her orders from the mailbox. Pulling the paper from the box, she read the old printed words on one side: *"In a sweeping passion she seized a glass vase from the table and flung it upon the tiles of the hearth. She wanted to destroy something. The clash and clatter were what she wanted to bear."*

Paper being scarce, sometimes her messages came on the backs of pages from old books, sometimes written in the margins. Sometimes the messages were just circled words within the text.

Sophie's orders usually came from Foxglove. They'd only met a few times over the years when absolutely necessary, yet Sophie felt a connection with her. She'd imbued her with certain traits by analyzing the firmness of her handwriting and wondering about her choices of quotes and song lyrics to convey her messages. She'd met her not long after joining the Watch. Knowing that Foxglove was from a village outside of her own Boswell, they didn't have occasion to meet often. Sophie also wondered about the code name, Foxglove, and how she'd chosen it. Sophie herself was accustomed to having two names, remembering the old Romany custom her adoptive parents had continued with her. Hers, Aishe, had been given to her the day she arrived in the Romany *kumpania* when they'd taken her in along with her younger sister Laurie. Though no one called her that since their deaths; only those she loved had ever used that name. There was something intimate about sharing that hidden part of herself with Foxglove, even just on paper.

She flipped the message over to see the handwritten note on the bottom of the page:

*"Aishe~
Abide with me; 'tis eventide, and long will be the night if I cannot commune with thee nor find in thee my light. ~Foxglove"*

They would meet that evening at the lighthouse. Sophie thought again of her adoptive parents who'd brought her to this remote place, named her, and given her the chance for rebirth.

A LIGHT FROM THE ASHES

“My Aisbe, you and your sister have not been with us long. We’ve tried to teach you the ways of the ancient Romanies here in the kumpania.”

“Yes, Daj,” Sophie helps her new mother wash the clothes in the small stream outside of town with the other women.

A great yellow Monarch butterfly lands on a rock in the middle of the stream, moving so slowly that Sophie wonders if time has stopped in this new quiet place, more quiet than any other place she’d been. In the night, the sound of guns and screams still stabbed her dreams, bleeding out the fear and loss.

The butterfly flits its wings, restarting time.

“Do you see those young trees across the stream?” Her Daj points to a stand of saplings in almost a complete circle. Her arm is thin and graceful as the trees she points to. “Your Dadu and I planted those trees but may not see them grown tall as you will.”

“What do you mean, Daj?”

“The same time is not granted to all. We have and love you now. We are thankful for this time. But later moments may not be granted to us. So, you must always remember those things we’ve taught you. Help your sister remember. The wind may bear us away as that butterfly on the breeze. Will you try to remember our ways?”

Sophie wraps her arms, dripping wet, around her Daj’s waist. The scent of wild raspberries wraps around them both. She breathes in the raspberries, the stream, her Daj, and the moment, holding them suspended in her lungs as long as she can before breathing out. “I’ll always remember.”

Still standing by the mailbox, Sophie turned back to look out to the bay behind her house. Her farm on the hill rolled down toward the beach, waves singing to the morning. Between the gray, salt-blasted wall of her house and the stand of trees at the edge of the woods, she could see the lighthouse in miniature, like a darkened lantern just barely rising out of the water. It hadn’t been used for many years since the waves had taken over the island on which it stood and crept toward the mainland, gaining ground without retreat. The cold Atlantic now swirled just beneath the gallery of the old lighthouse where once stood the keepers, on the lookout for ships which would never again grace the seas.

It was a dangerous endeavor to reach the old light, so the message was infused with importance. Sophie turned the paper over and over, the words crinkling beneath her fingers, enduring yet fragile. She traced the words, soaking them in, willing them to lift from the page, enter her body, and fill

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her with some kind of strength for what lay ahead.

“Mommy!” Bridget called from the porch, rubbing her eyes, still sleepy. Her strawberry blond curls a bright contrast to the faded gray house behind.

Even with frightening feats to be performed, she remembered that belonged to the night. In the day, there was still breakfast to be made, the child bathed, wood chopped, and clothes washed.

“Coming, honey.”

* * * * *

Sam woke shivering in the cool morning damp. The fire was out. But something else seemed strange. His ears registered the morning sounds: birds out for their breakfast, other creatures starting to stir among the trees and underbrush, crickets chirping. What was missing? Rubbing his eyes, adjusting to the light, he sat up, looking to where the boy had slept on his extra blanket nearer where the fire was. But the boy was not there. Sam’s blanket was folded neatly near his feet where the boy had left it, but there was no other sign of him around the small campsite. Sam thought maybe he’d gone into the woods a ways to relieve himself, but when he didn’t return after a few minutes, Sam was concerned. He packed up quickly, pulling the last of the bread from his pack to eat on the road. He wondered which way the boy would have taken and why he’d run off so early. Sam looked both directions down the road through the dispersing fog. He thought he saw movement toward the east, so quickened his steps in that direction.

“Ethan! Ethan, boy! Hold up!”

The figure stopped and waited.

Sam ran to catch up with him. “Why did you leave so early, son? Didn’t you at least want to have some breakfast?”

Ethan shrugged, “I didn’t want to wake you, I guess.”

“Well, why did you leave at all? I thought maybe I’d take you with me back to my village, and then we could figure out what to do with you from there.”

“No need to bother. I’ll be alright.” Ethan started to turn and walk away.

“Now, hold on there. Just wait a minute, will you?”

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Ethan stopped walking, but his eyes stayed on the ground.

“I have no doubt you can take care of yourself. But the thing is, you don’t have to. I know a little of what your life is like. I was out on my own when I was a boy too.”

Ethan looked up at this remark, wondering if it could be possible there were grown people who had survived a life like his.

Sam continued, “Even though I had friends with me, we were fairly starved. There wasn’t much in the way of food after the war. Now, I’m not saying you have to stay with me permanently if you don’t want to. I’ll leave that to you. But just know I’d like to take you with me, at least help to make sure you get a decent meal from time to time. What do you say?”

Ethan straightened his shoulders, wiping his sleeve across his nose. “I guess that’d be alright.”

“Peter Pan and the Lost Boy, right?” Sam grinned.

“Right.”

“Now, let’s see what we can do about breakfast.”

* * * * *

The smells of sun-ripened apples, burning leaves, baking pies, and a hint of gardenia met Sam almost like a kiss. This is what he had remembered, just the welcome he’d hoped for. He led Ethan down the hill toward the village, Jesse’s Hollow. The aromas reminded Sam it was Market Day in the town. All were preparing their trades of harvested vegetables, baked goods, hand-crafted jewelry, and the like. The sound of a guitar strumming came from the distance. Yellow birch and red maples formed a kind of tunnel over the path, obscuring the view of the town square until they were right upon it. A wave of memories of Market Days past washed over Sam as the fragrance borne on the breeze. Helping Zacharias set up the photography equipment and samples of his work, carting a basket of necklaces and bracelets for Gemma which she’d made of the stones found along the creek bed. And always the hunger in the pit of his stomach as he was accosted by all the smells of food and treats to be had for barter.

Two small tied canvas sacks hung from Sam’s belt carrying raspberries and hickory nuts he’d gathered on the trail to trade for bread and honey. All other necessities could be retrieved from the Government Office. No

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private farms were allowed to have animals other than chickens. So, every Market Day once a week, the people could present themselves at the Government Office with their identification cards and be given a ration of meat and milk. They could also request clothes, soap, medicines, and other necessities if needed.

A shock of deep blue uniforms stood out against the rust colored backdrop. Sam was somewhat shocked to see at least ten Corsairs standing guard at the edge of the town square, rifles in hand. In fact, there were more groups of them spread out along the border of the square. Sam hadn't seen the Corsairs in such abundant number for many years. Ethan instinctively began walking more closely and slightly behind Sam as they neared the soldiers. Sam reached an arm around the boy's shoulders.

"Not to worry, son. This is my home. All will be well," he reassured, having to somewhat force the words out in a normal timbre. He found himself wondering if it were true.

"Halt," a sergeant spoke up harshly, stepping forward. "Identification cards."

Sam pulled his card from his pack, trying to make conversation with the soldier. "It's good to finally be home after so long. I've been at the lumber camp for the past few years. Smells like someone's got a pot of Brunswick stew on. That'll be nice for a change."

The guard looked suspiciously at the card, then Sam, then Ethan. "Sam Erikson released from civilian service two days ago. It shouldn't have taken you so long to return and report. Where did you go?"

"I was caught in a rainstorm just after leaving camp."

"Who is the boy? There are no children listed on your card. No wife or family."

Ethan shrank back.

"Stumbled upon him in the woods. He was starving. Parents are dead. So I brought him with me."

"You must register him as your adopted son at the G.O. immediately before you will be allowed any trade privileges."

Sam looked around for a moment, somewhat confused, and beginning to bristle at the sergeant's accusatory attitude. The other soldiers stepped slightly forward as he hesitated to respond. He knelt down at Ethan's level to address the boy. "I saw some more berries in the underbrush over there. I think we could use some more to trade. Can you go and pick some?"

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Ethan nodded and ran off to the side of the path, happy to be away from the soldiers.

“Sergeant, I have only just met this boy. I had planned to help him find a permanent home with a family. But I’m not sure I’m the best choice of adopted father for him just now. As you say, I’m not yet married. Besides, I don’t even know if he wants to stay with me permanently. Couldn’t we just get him his own identification card and then go from there?”

“That is not permitted.”

“Has there been a new law instituted?”

“*No child shall be allowed in any town nor to receive government rations without an accompanying parent or guardian with corresponding identification card.* This has always been the law, even if you townspeople never followed it,” he almost spit the word “townspeople” as if it were distasteful in his mouth.

“Now, calm down, Sergeant. I have no intention of breaking the law. I’m just trying to get some clarification and do what’s best for the boy. He’s obviously been through a lot, having already lost his real parents.”

“He wouldn’t have lost them if they weren’t revolutionaries. The Triumvirate must make sure there are no more rebels on the loose in the form of young brats.”

Sam felt as if he’d been slapped in the face. The sting began to well in his eyes as he thought of his own parents long gone.

“Now, you *will* bring the boy to be adopted, identified, and recorded, or you will not be allowed to enter this village. Understood?”

“Yes.” Sam tried to keep the edge out of his voice.

The sergeant raised an eyebrow, waiting for something before he returned Sam’s identification card.

“Yes, sir,” Sam added.

The sergeant thrust Sam’s card back in his hand before standing aside. “Let them pass. Make sure he goes straight to the G.O.”

Sam turned to find Ethan, who was not picking berries after all, but sitting and observing the scene play out from his hiding place in the brush. “Come on, son. Let’s go,” Sam placed an almost imperceptible emphasis on the *son*.

* * * * *

At the Government Office, Ethan was duly registered as Sam’s son.

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Two rations of meat and milk, two sets of winter clothes each including gray work shirts, work boots, gray winter coats, and brimmed canvas hats. Ethan felt the luxury of having his own things and enough food not to worry his stomach. He carried his clothes neatly folded in front of him, almost reverently.

Sam found a stand of fruit and autumn vegetables, trading for a small basketful. "Here's an apple, boy."

A grin appeared over the stack of clothes.

"Here, give me those. I'll carry them." Then turning to the keeper of the fruit stand, "Do you know Zacharias?"

"Yes, of course," the kindly woman responded. "Our senator and leader of the Old Ones, she whispered."

So, he'd become the oldest living citizen, Sam mused.

"I've not seen him here today. Does he still keep the same farmhouse outside of town?"

"Yes. He doesn't come every Market Day anymore. So often tired."

"Thank you, ma'am," Sam smiled and began the walk toward his old home, Ethan following behind.

His feet knew well the way, always turning toward Gemma. He wondered too why she was not in the town square on Market Day. Everything seemed odd on this day. Everything just a little off, not quite as he remembered home. There was an air of nervousness among the people he encountered. Everyone seemed to be looking over their shoulders. But Sam would let nothing ruin this day. He was within a ten-minute walk of seeing Gemma. Everything would be better when he could see her face again.

He'd played the scene out a thousand different ways in his mind. She would be outside, Zacharias on the porch behind her. Sam would run to her, spinning her around as she laughed. Or he'd walk slowly, kneeling before her to offer the ring without a word. Maybe she'd see him first and run down the drive to meet him at the gate. But every iteration of the dream ended the same way, with her in his arms and tears on their faces.

"Is Zacharias your adopted father?" Ethan asked, pulling Sam from his daydreaming.

"Yes, he is. He took Gemma and me in when he found us living in the woods behind his house. A scrawny and angry lad I was too."

"Where were your parents?" Ethan looked at the dirt path, kicking up

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rocks as he shuffled forward.

Nor could Sam look at him when he answered, “Killed by the Corsairs after the Second Revolution.”

Ethan nodded. Then he knew that Sam knew. He just knew. Ethan slowly reached his hand out to take Sam’s as they walked on.

“Does Zacharias have a wife?”

“No, boy. She died not long after the Disaster. Things were very different back then. People weren’t used to things we take for granted. Many couldn’t find food for themselves and starved. Others got sick from contaminated water. Then there were the attacks that happened. You know, Zacharias never actually told me how she died. I didn’t ask. But this town is named for her. Jesse’s Hollow.”

As Sam and the boy came around a bend in the road, he saw the white farmhouse at the end of the drive, peeking out from a stand of yellow birch trees, making the house look like it was lit from behind. The old man sat on the front porch, facing a small field of corn not yet harvested. He rocked slowly back and forth in a faded gray rocking chair. His eyes were closed, so he didn’t see the two travelers walking up the drive.

Creaking steps on the front porch alerted Zacharias to their presence. His eyes opened slowly and registered recognition more slowly. “Sam,” the word seemed to fill his whole being. He had to take several deep breaths before continuing, trying to sound nonchalant about Sam’s return. “You’ve changed, son. Time was you couldn’t even grow a beard. And now look at you, mountain man that you are,” he chuckled.

Sam extended a hand to help his friend from the chair, pulling him into an embrace almost too much for their manly pride to withstand. “It’s so good to see you, Z,” Sam said into his shoulder, which seemed to have shrunk since they last saw each other.

Stepping back, Zacharias surveyed his foster son. “So, it’s been seven years. It feels longer.”

“So it does. So it does.” Sam quickly looked toward the fields to wipe his eyes without detection.

“And who’s this you’ve brought with you?”

“Z, this is Ethan. New member of the family.”

“Nice to meet you, Ethan. Looks half-starved. Just like you were. Why didn’t you feed him?”

“I would have, Z, if he’d been with me. We just met yesterday,” Sam

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responded. "I smell your Brunswick stew. Maybe that will start to remedy his nutrition. Is it on the fire out back?"

"Of course."

Walking through the house to the back yard, Sam took mental note of the changes. Dusty furniture, some pieces missing, unfinished repair jobs here and there. Gemma wouldn't have left things like this. She couldn't be living here with the house in this state. Sam and Ethan dropped their things in the front room, then pulled dishes from the kitchen cabinets, a few of the doors nearly coming off the hinges.

"Where is she?" Sam asked, almost under his breath.

"Gemma? She hasn't lived here in quite some time, Sam."

A fear gripped Sam's heart that he hadn't felt since the war. That sinking sickness, twisting every organ, dried his mouth and made his head pound. He turned quickly to survey the eyes of his old friend.

"No, she's alright, boy. She still lives in the village, just on another farm. Calm down. I should have said that first."

Sam took a deep breath in. Then another. His hands on the counter for balance. He stood up straighter, feeling a sense of urgency he couldn't explain. He needed to see her now.

"Well, if you'll point me in the right direction, I'll go see her. Can Ethan stay here for a while? He needs dinner and could use a bath." He tousled the boy's grimy hair.

"Sam, I should tell you . . ."

"Can it wait, Z? I just need to get to Gemma for now."

"Maybe it's best this way." Zacharias placed a hand on Sam's shoulder. "The old Tucker place on the other side of the bridge. Remember?"

"Sure. Hunted squirrels on their place often enough."

"The Tuckers left a few years back. Tucker himself was called up for army duty, so they moved the family closer to the Wash District."

"That's too bad. He liked farming." Sam pulled the books for Gemma out of his pack. "I'm not sure how long I'll be. But I'll be back before dark."

"Did you notice the lantern poles along the road? Makes it easier to travel than before. One good thing the Corsairs did."

"So I did. So I did. Well, I'll be back in a while."

* * * * *

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The old bridge had been fixed and patched in places, so Sam didn't have to cross it as gingerly as he used to. He remembered jumping on the boards to scare Gemma. Or the time they fell off the railing into the stream below, soaked to the skin, running in the sun to keep warm, falling in the grass out of breath.

"I'd like to be a writer one day to write about days like this," Sam panted.

"Writers don't exist anymore, silly," Gemma responded, ever the practical one.

"They could, one day. Maybe by the time I'm old enough."

"The Triumvirate will choose your profession, and you know it. They'll probably put you in the army."

"Because I'm so brave?"

"To teach you to follow orders," she laughed. "Now come on. I'll beat you home!" Her wet brown hair streaming in twisted locks behind her.

* * * * *

Gemma knelt in the front garden, pulling the weeds away from the tomatoes warmed by the sun. Sitting back on her heels, she wiped the sweat from her face with her handkerchief, hard work warming her despite the crisp weather. She looked around the garden, trying to calculate how much longer it would take to pull the weeds. She saw a movement over the rise at the fence. A man was passing through her gate. Not quite able to make out the figure, she squinted against the sun. He walked somewhat quickly but seemed to be checking his speed and purposely slowing himself down. He looked down, mumbling slightly to himself. Gemma stood, wiping her hands on her apron before removing it. Her pants showed signs of her interrupted job, despite the apron.

When the man was a few yards away from her, she thought she recognized something in his face beneath the beard. The man removed his hat, revealing shining green eyes brightened with tears. And as if the tears were contagious, corresponding drops formed in Gemma's own eyes.

"Sam," she whispered. "Oh, it can't be."

As he neared, Sam thought he saw pain in the face of his love. Too many emotions played through her eyes too quickly for him to register

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them all. Her hair was pulled back under a handkerchief, rather than down around her shoulders as he'd often imagined in this moment. But it didn't matter. Nothing mattered. Gemma was standing directly in front of him. She was a picture, with the wisps of hair around her face lit by the sun. But no photograph could capture that brilliance. She was a poem, though no words could describe her. She was his, but he couldn't make himself reach out to hold her. So, he just stared for a few glorious moments, taking it all in, but feeling that he could never get enough.

Gemma looked down, playing with the apron in her hand, breaking the moment that held them both in stasis. "You've changed." She said the words quietly, and matter-of-factly, no judgment, just observation.

"Seems like a lot's changed around here," Sam responded. He noticed a tightness creeping into his shoulders, and a knot growing in his stomach. He was more nervous than he had expected to be.

"Where have you been?" she asked.

Sam laughed out loud then. "No matter where I went or how long I was gone, you always asked me that question when I came home. I'd forgotten."

"It's a valid question this time," she responded quietly.

"I wish I could describe to you the places I've been, what I've seen. I wrote you letters. But I guess you didn't get them."

"Never did."

"Not even the first one I left with Z?"

"Dear Gemma. Turns out I have to go to the lumber camp for a while before they'll give me the marriage license. Two years won't be too bad. I'll write you every day. I guess you can keep the oak chest for now. When we're married, it will be both of ours anyway. Write me."

"You memorized it?" Sam was a little surprised at this. Gemma wasn't one for sentimentality.

"It's the only letter I ever received from you. The only word for seven years, Sam. I had started to believe . . . I did believe that you . . ." Her voice broke off. She had one arm around her waist, one hand to her throat, holding herself in.

"Did you think I wasn't coming back? That I'd left you?"

"I thought you were dead!" She almost screamed the words, then took a deep breath in, trying to steady her breathing, stay in control.

Sam took a step forward, forcing her eyes to meet his. He reached out

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to touch her arm, but she pulled back.

“Gemma, sweetheart. I’m here now. I know it’s been a long time. They made me work a full seven years and wouldn’t let me back in the village until my time was served. It seemed strange at the time, but a lot of things seem strange around here. I’m back now, though. That’s all that matters.”

“I waited the two years. Z and I kept hoping for word from you. Then I waited two more.”

“Nothing’s changed between us, Gemma. We can . . .”

“Everything’s changed, Sam,” she whispered. “I’m married.”

The knot that had been growing in his gut suddenly exploded inside him. The books he’d been clutching tumbled to the ground at their feet. His vision went black for a moment as surely as if he’d been struck a physical blow.

“Why?”

“I thought you were dead. Z was sick and getting more run down. I couldn’t bear the thought of being alone forever. Then after you’d been gone for about two years, Kyle came back.”

“Kyle?! I thought he was . . .”

“Yes, the army took him. But he’s been released.”

“Kyle.” Sam spoke the word that tasted of frightened and hungry days in the woods, harking back to the past before this was his home, before Zacharias. Kyle, his friend turned Corsair.

“He didn’t have a choice about the army. You know that. Then when he came back, he was kind and helpful.”

“That’s no reason to marry someone!”

“I fell in love with him, Sam. I truly did.” Her hands fidgeted with the apron in her hand as she looked at the ground. “It wasn’t the same, though. He wasn’t you.” Taking a deep breath, she looked up with her only defense. “I thought you were dead.”

Sam stood silently for a few minutes, trying to process the new world he was thrown into. One second and two words had changed his entire existence. He had to force his body to breathe. A pair of birds flew out of a nearby tree, creating a shower of leaves underneath, which the breeze picked up and carried to another part of the yard. The acrid smell of smoke in the air pierced his nose and his consciousness.

When he could finally form words again, he spoke slowly. “You are the only person I’ve ever loved. And now . . . to marry Kyle when he left us

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the way he did. It's like I don't even know you."

"Maybe we never really knew each other, Sam. A lot can happen in seven years. I was starving on a diet of hope."

Sam couldn't meet Gemma's eyes. There was something foreign there now. He continued, almost talking to himself, "I can't look at you. When I look at you, I see him, and I feel nauseous. Everything, every move I made was always for you. Every blow, every insult from the managers taken happily because every day brought me closer to you if I could just hold out." Sam breathed heavily, unsuccessful in staving off his tears, "I would have walked through fire for you." His voice cracked.

Gemma's protective coldness broke under the warmth of his ardor. She took him in her arms, holding the man so changed from the boy who had left. But burying her face in his neck, she noticed his scent was still the same, and she breathed him in as if she'd been underwater deprived of air. "I think you already have," her words came out in a sob. Her world now shifted like sand under a wave.

After a few moments, they stood apart from each other, questions in both their eyes, no answers to be found. "I can't say goodbye to you, Gemma."

Looking past Sam, she saw Kyle coming up the drive and knew she had to end this here. "You aren't saying it. I am. Goodbye, Sam." With that, she turned and walked into the house, leaving Sam in the void behind her.

He picked up the books he'd dropped on the ground, and walked dazedly toward the gate, brushing shoulders with Kyle as he passed him. They each turned to look at each other, recognition playing across both their faces. The years had changed Kyle. He wore a short beard now, some gray in what used to be strawberry blond hair. He was thinner. But he was still Kyle. Turning again, they walked in opposite directions, Kyle toward Gemma, Sam away from her.

3

LAST DANCE OF COLOR

M^y Dear Gemma,

When I'm writing you these letters, I like to pretend we're out here in the woods together just like we used to be. Remember how we used to count the stars at night? You could always see farther and better than I could, so you always counted higher. I've tried to train my eyes to look deeper and farther into the night, tried to learn to see as you see. I'm not sure that will ever happen, though. Perhaps that's what leads people to marry, each bringing something the other lacks, fitting together like puzzle pieces.

The days run together sometimes. It's hard to tell one from the other when they aren't accented by messages and stories from home. I hope you are well, and Z too. I haven't heard from him either. My friends here in the lumber camp tell me it's normal for the mail to be inconsistent. So, I'm hopeful that one day I'll get a stack of letters. It will feel like the Christmases I've read about in books, the anticipation of gifts and the satisfaction of wishes. I've managed to get my hands on some paper. Don't ask me how, but after all, I'm in a lumber camp. So, I send it to you as my gift. Hopefully, I'll receive it back with part of you.

The work here is hard, but pleasant at times. It was pretty tough going at first, but I'm getting used to it. You'll have to get used to the calluses I'm working up on my hands. The managers tell me they've gotten some news about me. It looks like I might have to stay here a little longer than the two years. The demand for lumber has increased, and there aren't enough workers. So, we may be looking at three years instead. It's

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disappointing, I know, love. We just have to push through and be strong.

Please try to write soon. I miss your stories, your jokes. I miss kissing you, breathing you in. At night, I try to imagine your lips on mine, imagine you lying beside me. But it's not even close to the same as the nights we filled up with our love. My chest feels empty since my heart resides with you. Be well, my Gemma.

*All my love,
Sam*

* * * * *

Gemma knelt on the hardwood floor in front of the old oak chest, her hands running lightly over the wooden surface of the once dark finish of the oak, now faded with age. The white midday sunshine filtered through golden aspen leaves outside her window onto the chest, holding it in a rich and regal glow, the dust in the air giving definition to the rays of light. Her fingers found and rested in Sam's carvings on the top of trees, birds, and foxglove flowers now filled with the dust of the last seven years. Gemma loved and hated the chest in equal measure, as it had held so many of her dreams built and broken within its dimensions. It had first been a kind of joke with the foxglove carving, a reminder of the time Sam had saved her from the poisonous flowers. Then it was a promise, a covenant between them that they would share their futures as surely as their pasts. It was her anchor in the first few years of Sam's absence. Then a millstone around her neck when she was sure he was dead. She had closed and locked the cover along with a part of her heart the day she marked as his death date. And now here it stood, unmoved, unchanged, pronouncing judgment on her wayward heart for moving on. She found herself wishing she'd left the chest with Zacharias.

How Gemma had longed and prayed to whatever gods there were for Sam's return. But not like this, not now. She wondered if prayers were ever answered according to the desires of mere mortals. She hadn't allowed herself to open the chest in several years. And though it belonged to both of them, she'd insisted on bringing it with her to her new home when she married Kyle. She told him it was part of their shared past, a part of her, but assured him her feelings for Sam were buried, and she would never again open it. She had lied.

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Now with her husband downstairs, she brought out the key to unlock and unbury the past now resurrected. She held the only letter she had ever received from Sam, the one she'd read so often she'd memorized the words. The paper was soft in her hands, its folds worn, almost separating it into three sections. Beneath that were the final letters she had written to Sam when she had stopped sending them finally but couldn't bring herself to stop talking to him about her life, her dreams, her fears.

“ . . . On these cold winter nights, I think of you, hoping you are warm, and build my fire bigger than all the rest so maybe a bit of its warmth will reach you. Although no fire can warm me enough to make me need your arms less . . .

. . . When I was watching the sunset yesterday, it reminded me of one of the photographs you took that hangs in the dining room at Z's house. He told me you left your camera behind. That saddens me. I wish you'd taken it with you, Sam. I'm sure you will see many things inspiring enough to photograph. But maybe when you return . . .

. . . Sam, Kyle came back to the village today. It's been so long since we last saw him, I never thought we would. I was surprised to find out the Corsairs had released him. Medical reasons apparently. He will be working as a medic with the Council of Doctors. He has changed a great deal. He's lost that fire and anger that used to fuel his every move. He's much quieter and gentler if you can believe it. Strangely, having him here makes me feel a little closer to you. I wish we could all three be together again like we used to be, all taking care of each other, depending on each other. Despite the hardness of those days, I somehow miss them. And as always, I miss you . . .

. . . I've met a young girl named Daisy, maybe five or six. A blond and clever little urchin. She lives out in the forest outside of town with a group of children, larger than our group was. They seem to take care of her. I wish I could bring her to stay here with me, but I don't think they fully trust me yet. And I'm not even sure it would be the safest thing. The Corsairs have increased their guard for some reason. I worry about changes that may be coming. They are watching us more closely. So, I let her stay in our old cabin. Remember? The one beneath the pines. I try to go out there every few days to bring her and her band of children whatever supplies they need. Maybe one day it will be safe enough that she could become my daughter. Maybe our daughter. My heart counts the days . . .

With a deep breath, Gemma pulled herself back to the present. She tried to ground herself in the physical things around her, the smell of the wood in the chest, the light from the window, her knees hurting from kneeling on the wood floor of her bedroom. She closed her eyes for a moment, pinching the bridge of her nose. These letters were her past.

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Thinking of time made her glance at the wind-up clock on her nightstand, noting the time. That's why Kyle had come home. It was lunch time. He'd be waiting for her in the kitchen. Gemma wondered if she should send the chest back to Z's house. It would only torment her here. Why think now of what might have been when what *was* looked in her eyes daily, slept beside her at night, and gave her what little comfort she could expect from this life?

"Gemma, I'm home," Kyle called from the kitchen. This was her life now. This was what she had to build from. She closed and locked the lid to the chest and went downstairs.

As Gemma entered the kitchen, Kyle's broad back was facing her as he washed his hands in the cold water from the pump over the sink.

"What are you hungry for?" she asked. "We've got this week's rations in the root cellar. The hens laid plenty of eggs today. Plenty of vegetables from the garden."

"Let's save the rations for dinner. Maybe a couple of eggs and a salad? I can fix it if you're busy."

"I'll fix it. I'm hungry myself."

Kyle turned to face his wife to find she'd turned away from him and was now setting about the task of preparing lunch. He wished he could see her face but didn't want to appear awkward or make her stop what she was doing. So, he spoke to the air between them. "He's back, then."

"Yes, it was kind of a shock to me for a minute."

"Thought he was dead or gone for good."

"Did you want him to be?" Gemma asked between cracking the eggs.

"You know better than that. I guess I'm just asking if I should be worried. I know what you two were to each other. At least, I know what you've told me."

"I buried Sam a long time ago."

"Doesn't mean you won't have feelings when he pops back up."

"Nothing is sure or permanent in the kind of lives we lead, I suppose."

"Meaning us?"

Gemma placed her hands on the counter to steady them before she turned to face her husband. "Meaning him, Kyle. It was strange for me to see him today. He's different. I'm different. Our entire lives are different."

Kyle stepped toward her but stopped just shy of touching her. "Are you happy? Happier than you would have been with him?"

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“How do I explain this? The life he had planned for us was never going to happen. It was a dream. Sam was always idealistic. He always put me up on this pedestal, wanted to worship me. I don’t think I was ever a real person to him. It was always about what I could have been.”

“Unlike me, is that it?”

“I think you and I recognize the humanness in each other.”

“Is that a disappointment to you?”

“On the contrary, it’s a relief,” Gemma reached for Kyle’s hand, wanting to reassure him and herself.

The door of the kitchen from the back of the house burst open, and four townspeople stumbled in, one being carried between the other three. All were talking at once, so it took a moment to make sense of what was happening. Gemma gripped the counter behind her with one hand and reached for a knife with the other while her mind quickly ascertained whether the people in her kitchen were a threat or not. Kyle immediately ran to them to aid in carrying the one injured.

“Here, bring him to the table,” Kyle commanded. “Gemma, hurry and clear it off. We’ll need bandages, cold water and hot. The fire’s already going outside. You there, Stanley, run out and set some water to boil.”

Gemma calmed her breathing and followed Kyle’s efficient orders. As her fear departed, she recognized her neighbors Stanley, Ruth, Jerry, and the injured man, Ruth’s husband, Jordan. “Ruth, what happened?” she queried as they cleared the table, laying him gently on an old cloth.

“Bullet or saber?” Kyle was more concerned with relevant information.

“Saber,” Ruth’s brother Jerry offered.

“We weren’t doing anything,” Ruth cried. “He’d just gotten home after the lunch bell. We were just settin’ down to eat when they bust in the door. No knockin’. No warnin’. Say they had proof my man was inciting a revolution. He’s to be arrested. Course he ain’t done nothin’, Gemma, I swear. You gotta believe me. We don’t get involved in none of that.”

Kyle had ripped Jordan’s shirt and was trying to determine the damage to the man’s torso. The cut looked clean enough, and seemed to have missed the vital organs. Blood loss was the concern. “Focus, Ruth! Tear some of those bandages or we’re going to lose him. How did the wound happen?”

“Well, all Jordan did was stand to tell the soldiers they had the wrong man. Before I knew it, one of them knocked him across the face at the

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same time another one had pulled out his sword. Jordan fell across it before he hit the floor. Then Stanley and Jerry heard me scream and came runnin' in from the field. I guess the Corsairs thought they'd killed him so arrestin' him was no use. And they left."

Jordan lay unconscious on the table from both the blood loss and the blow to the head. So, he would feel none of the stitching which was to come.

"Jerry, help me hold him down in case he wakes up. These deep stitches will hurt him," Kyle spoke firmly but quietly.

"I suppose they're more stupid than we thought. That's in our favor, I guess," Gemma mused.

"Really, Gemma?" Kyle never liked to hear the Corsairs run down, even if he wasn't one of them anymore. "Maybe they did exactly what they'd planned. Ruth, why would they think Jordan was a revolutionary?" Kyle continued to work over her husband. "Stanley, bring in the hot water!"

"I don't have any idea. He works at their stables and in our own fields. That's it. He ain't got time for nothin' else. They seem to be makin' a lot more phony arrests these days if you ask me."

"Why would that be?" Jerry asked.

"We don't know that's what they're doing. Let's try to keep ourselves calm now and focus on getting Jordan back to health, eh?" Kyle gave his final word on the matter.

Gemma put her arm around Ruth. "He's right, honey. Let's just try to stay calm and help Jordan. Come on outside now and let Kyle finish up with him. You don't want to see all this."

* * * * *

Sophie's village of Boswell was always a coastal town even before the coast moved inland. But it was a tiny town when fully inhabited. Now the village consisted of those few families who had stumbled upon it near the end of the Second Revolution, after the raids had forced thousands from their homes. Swaths of land miles wide, burned off the earth, paths of ash led the refugees to the sea. The days of home recovery returned when the citizens roamed from village to village, looking for habitable dwellings. Here Sophie's flight ended. Here her body landed while her heart remained with her Romany parents and sister buried in the ash. She never thought

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she'd suffer such a loss again as the death of her birth parents. She now sometimes found herself wondering which of her many losses was worse.

Her home was an old farmhouse, the fields now fallow and overgrown, falling off into the encroaching ocean. She would sit on the porch with the drowning sound of waves in her ears, pushing out all thought save the in and out of each wave, like the earth taking a breath, in and out, in and out. She reminded herself that this was all she had to do as well. Just breathe. In and out. The pain of those days was now anesthetized by the passage of time—more than a decade.

As Sophie walked into town with Bridget for the required town meeting, she noticed more signs painted across the town buildings than had been there even a week before. One on the side of the blacksmith's shop was painted right on the baked brick. The words, "Stay the course with the Corsairs," were painted in bold white letters across the puffed out blue chest of a soldier, a smile painted on his face, but unable to reach his eyes.

Holding Bridget's tiny hand, standing in the courtyard of the village with the rest of her friends and neighbors, she listened to the troop captain drone on in an endless stream of admonitions, reading from the prepared speech from the country's governing body, the Triumvirate. "Citizens are reminded that all public meetings are prohibited, except those called by the Triumvirate. All are urged to make accommodations for the new ration portion sizes. Each citizen will receive one quarter portion less per day, effective immediately." As the captain spoke, the other Corsairs walked through the crowd to ensure a peaceful response, which was no response at all. "And as always," he concluded, "we must remember to stay the course."

"Stay the course," came the monotone expected response from the crowd in unison. One or two people were quietly pulled out of the group for failing to parrot the response. It jarred Sophie's ears to hear her tiny daughter repeat the same words as the rest of the crowd without thinking about it. The child knew nothing of what it meant but had learned from her mother to do what was expected and not to draw attention to herself. Sophie recognized this as a sifting process, the soldiers shaking up the crowd to see who would and would not comply with orders and expectations, regardless of the stimulus. It seemed to be happening more frequently than in past years. With more soldiers, came more speeches,

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more sifting, and more arrests. No doubt it was why Foxglove would soon be giving her a new mission.

* * * * *

Walking back from Gemma's house, Sam's head felt hot. He saw pieces of his life with Gemma passing before his eyes as surely as the leaves passed before his feet, and he wondered if he was dying. She was his compass, his navigation leading to the only place he'd ever wanted to be. He had never imagined a life without Gemma in it. He'd never had to. Yet here it was, staring him in the face, and he felt suddenly unmoored.

He had worked for her, yet not with her, for seven years. Even still, she was his every thought. He knew that's where the real battle would play out—in his mind. He began to wonder how it would be possible to extract a thought, a hundred thoughts, a thousand thoughts from the stage of his mind, a place, he was discovering, where he wasn't truly master. Eyes on the ground, shuffling back toward his old home, Sam made the startling discovery that he was gone. All the things which had made him Sam had been erased. There were no traces of memory. All of his thoughts were in his lost letters to Gemma. No bits of photos, journals, or even a line of the life he had lived. It was not as if he had died, but as if he had never existed. And into the exquisiteness of the void, he fell, not knowing where he would land or into what world this non-existence would take hold.

Walking back through the door to Zacharias' house, Sam thought he was moving more slowly than usual, everything seemed to have slowed. Zacharias sat in the rocker, gray as his hair, with Ethan at his feet, reading to him from the aged copy of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* he'd kept hidden from the book burners years before.

“You have plenty of courage I'm sure,” answered Oz. ‘All you need is confidence in yourself. There is no living thing that is not afraid when it faces danger. The true courage is in facing danger when you are afraid, and that kind of courage you have in plenty.’”

Sam found himself being drawn into the story for a moment, remembering how much he and Gemma had longed to travel to a place like Oz together, how they had gloried in the different creatures, shivered at the thought of the Wicked Witch catching them, and joined with Dorothy, the Scarecrow, the Tin Man, and the Lion to defeat her. His tears felt hot on his cheeks after the walk in the cold autumn air.

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“Why didn’t you tell me?” Sam’s question interrupted the reading.

Zacharias looked at his son with pain in his eyes. He had known Sam would be hurt this day but knew there was nothing for it but to let things run their natural course. He placed the book on the floor beside him. “Ethan boy, why don’t you run out back and see if you can find any munchkins lurking in the yard.”

“There’s no such thing,” Ethan still took everything literally and had not yet learned how to use his imagination. The need for survival left no time for play.

“Are you sure?” Zacharias grinned at him. “I’m pretty sure I’ve seen a munchkin or two in the grove. This is just the right time to find them. Run along now. I’ll call you in a little while.”

Sam waited for the boy to leave before throwing his barb, “You lead him around with fairy stories just like you did with me, letting me believe I’d find my happily ever after today. Why in the world would you let me walk into that unprepared?”

“You weren’t really listening to me earlier.”

“I mean before. You could have written me. All these years, not a word from either of you.”

“You know the mail is unpredictable. We did write. Both of us, for years. And we heard nothing from you.”

“The Watch could have found me. There are ways to get messages through when it’s important.”

“They can’t use their limited resources for personal messages, you know that.”

“Seven years, Zacharias! Seven years I worked for her, only for her. And now this betrayal. And with Kyle! I can’t get those years back.” Sam was pacing, unable to contain his anger or his energy as his emotions overtook him.

“None of us can get the past back,” Zacharias remained calm. “We can only continue to move forward.”

“You can’t know what it’s like to have survived what we survived together. To have no one but each other to depend on for safety, comfort, and your very life.”

Zacharias took a moment to heave himself out of the rocker, a harder task in the biting chill. He brought the book back to its hiding place, giving him time to consider before speaking. “No, I didn’t survive in the woods

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with my Jesse as you two did. But I know what it is to put your life in someone else's hands. I know what it is to lose the witness to your life. You know I understand that, son. Take time to mourn her, to feel your pain. But then you must move on. If nothing else, for this boy."

"With life as uncertain as it is, how can I possibly take care of him?"

"Precisely because life is so uncertain. I asked those same questions once."

"It's all just too much to take in. She hardly spoke to me. I need more answers than the few she gave me."

"Remember when I taught you to read from song lyrics in old CDs we found? You always wanted more. You didn't want to read between the lines, to fill in the blanks with your own meaning. You wanted more words, more explanation. You are the same now."

Sam was wandering around the room aimlessly as they'd been talking. He stopped to look out the window, musing almost to himself, "Have you ever really looked at the last leaves of autumn? They're always brightest just before they fall, a last dance of color, making you think the glory will last forever until nothing is left but the crunch of death under your feet." He breathed deeply, wiping the tears from his eyes.

"You never really knew her, Sam. You created her in your mind. You *loved her against reason, against promise, against peace, against hope, against happiness, against all discouragement that could be.*"

"Don't throw Dickens in my face!" Sam snapped but felt the pain and the truth of those words. "Z, what's going on around here? Ge—" he couldn't bring himself to say the name that had played on his lips and in his mind for as long as he could remember. "She was so thin."

"They've lessened the rations among other things. I want to show you something." He walked to the hidden door beneath the stairs. Within that closet, there was another hidden door to a cabinet deeper underneath the stairs. On the outside of it were hooks and coats. No one who didn't know the door was there would think to look twice at it. From behind the door, Zacharias pulled out a rifle, illegal for regular citizens to possess.

"What the hell are you doing with this? You could be arrested!" Sam looked over his shoulder instinctively, expecting someone to be spying, as they inevitably always were.

"Tell me what you notice about it." Zacharias was perpetually teaching, could never just say something outright.

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“It looks brand new. Not quite the same model as the ones they usually carry. What’s this here?” Sam ran his finger along an extra piece at the end of the barrel.

“That’s a silencer.”

“They’ve only had the guns as a show of force since the Second Revolution. We rarely even hear a gunshot anymore. Why would they even need silencers?”

“Maybe for precisely that reason.”

“How and where are they making new guns anyway?”

“Now you’re asking the right questions.”

Sam handed the gun back to Zacharias as if it were a snake he couldn’t get far enough away from him. “I don’t want to get involved in this, Z. And I won’t have Ethan involved in the Watch activities. Why couldn’t we just accept the peace that was offered us?”

“A peace that isn’t really peace? They give us rules supposedly to stay safe, but safe from what and at what cost?”

“I can’t do this with you right now. I’m paying costs of my own for the crime of being too loyal. I have to take some time to adjust to the new way things are. I have to go away for a while, Z.”

“Are you sure that’s the best idea, son? It might be best to stay here and take care of this boy.”

“I can’t right now. I can’t take care of anyone. Can you please just look after him for a little while and let me heal in my own way? You know where I’ll be if you need me.”

“You don’t mean that run down cabin where I found you and Gemma freezing? It doesn’t even have a roof anymore.”

“I’ll fix it. Maybe it will give me something to do. I’ve gotten used to working with my hands. Things won’t seem so foreign to me. It’ll be fine. Look after the boy for me until I return.”

* * * * *

Ruth lay next to Jordan on the pallet Gemma had prepared in front of the dining room fireplace. She listened to his breathing and periodically checked his forehead for fever, waiting for any change in his condition. Kyle had said he would be fine with time, but she still feared for her husband’s life and contemplated the fragility of mortality, how it all could

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change or be lost in a matter of seconds.

Gemma and Kyle whispered together in the kitchen, trying not to disturb their unexpected guests, but wanting to stay close to help if needed.

“I’ve received a message from the Cutler farm on the other side of the village. Mrs. Cutler is in labor. Her baby will come tonight,” Gemma began. “I’ve promised to go and help. So, I probably won’t be back until at least morning.”

“Well, I can’t come with you, obviously,” Kyle looked toward his patient.

“It will be fine. I won’t be the only one there. She has her sister as well. We can handle things between us. But will you be alright here?”

“Should be. I can send for Jerry or Stanley again if necessary. We can’t use medicine from the Council of Doctors. The Corsairs wanted this man dead, and we’re aiding and abetting.”

“You don’t think they’ll come here, do you?”

“Don’t know why they should. They left him for dead.”

“Even still, you will be careful, won’t you?” Gemma’s eyes showed true concern for husband, stilling his earlier fears about her feelings for Sam.

He smiled, touching her cheek. “If you want me to.”

She leaned forward to kiss him quickly before going to pack up the things she would need.

* * * * *

Sam did not have to think about his way to the cabin where he’d lived for more than a year before being discovered by Zacharias. He meandered through the woods, allowing his thoughts to wander freely as well. He felt the weight of his pack on his back as a burden. Zacharias had loaded him down with what food he could spare from the cellar, the rest of his needs he would find in nature. But it wasn’t the physical weight that tired him. Nothing seemed easy anymore. He felt his muscles and heart slowing as the rivers in winter, slowing and freezing until a thaw releases them.

The cabin was higher in elevation than Jesse’s Hollow, and the air was biting against his cheeks. He passed the lake which had already experienced its first hard frost of the season. It was pockmarked with ripples in stasis as if it had frozen suddenly while in the middle of a windstorm. But in the places where the water still lived, the ripples responded to the caress of the

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wind.

The cabin under the pines revealed itself slowly as Sam approached. He was surprised to find the roof intact, and not only in good repair, but with a plume of smoke escaping its chimney. Nothing, apparently, would be as he expected to find it anymore. The crows crowded around the refuse pile behind the cabin, enjoying their feast. After years of hunting and surviving in the woods, Sam knew how to walk silently. He did so as he neared the cabin, peering through the eye level windows. The inside of the cabin was clean and well cared for. The cabinets seemed stocked. But the woodpile next to the fireplace was low. He saw no inhabitants inside but assumed they would soon return to tend the fire. This would not be his refuge, then, and he would have to find solace elsewhere. He thought it fortunate he'd decided to pack his warmest clothes, for his time would be spent mostly outdoors as the weather continued to cool the air and his ire.

* * * * *

In the twilight hours, Gemma approached the Cutler farm on the edge of the village. The darkness descended earlier and earlier as winter neared. She wondered why this always took her by surprise, the early nights of winter. She pulled her wool coat more tightly around her, catching her breath in the cold wind blowing in her face. Seeing the lights from the farmhouse shining across the field, she stopped, dropping her heavy pack full of blankets, food, and supplies beside her. She held her lantern up above her head, waving it back and forth. Then took one of the blankets to cover it intermittently to achieve the signal she desired: *"Gone to the cabin. Kyle will ask after me here. Will pass by again in the morning."* The curtains shut once and re-opened, signaling message received. Then Gemma picked up her pack and walked on toward the forest. She needed to make a stop at the cabin before making her way to the lighthouse for her meeting with Aishe.

Gemma listened at the door of the cabin to hear if anyone was inside. The curtains were drawn; no information would escape the windows, though they seemed cleaner than when she last visited. She heard a wooden chair scrape the floor in the kitchen deep within, so she slowly entered the door, not making a sound. As soon as she'd crossed the threshold, a knife was at her throat. Gemma's breath stopped as she turned slowly but could

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see nothing. The angle of the knife told her what she needed to know.

“Hey, kid,” she said through a smile.

The knife fell, and a giggle escaped a little girl’s mouth. She threw her arms around Gemma’s waist and waited for her lesson.

“That was a good trick with the chair, Daisy. How’d you do it?”

“I had some string and pulled on it from behind the door.”

“Clever girl.”

Daisy was happy to know her efforts had impressed Gemma. “How’d you know it was me with the knife?”

“It was angled down, so I knew you were a child. Next time you’d better stand on a chair. Keep them confused.”

“I will.” Daisy picked up Gemma’s pack to help her bring the things inside.

“I’ve brought you warm blankets and more food for the next few days. Where are the other children?”

“They went hunting. Oh, I almost forgot, I have a message for you from the Watch.”

“Who brought it?”

“Someone new. Never saw her before. She called herself Cypress.”

“Did she give the right pass code?”

“Of course. I wouldn’t have talked to her without it.”

“Well, let’s have the note then.”

On the page of a book Gemma didn’t recognize, she read the circled words sprinkled around the page: *fort, night, trains, port, mid, night, and base*. The bottom of the page bore the signature Cypress.

Taking a deep breath, Gemma considered the meaning of the message. The guns and horses would be transported to the Corsairs’ base at midnight two weeks from today. They must move quickly. Aishe needed to mobilize her people to cut off the transport.

Gemma threw the note from Cypress into the fire, then reached into the cabinet to the right of the fireplace. In old days, this was used to keep food warm. She used it to hide the couple of books in her possession. She pulled out *Dandelion Wine*. Flipping through its pages, she found the appropriate one. She hesitated to pull the page out from the cover. It was one of her favorite parts of the book. But it could not be helped. She had to use it. She circled the words: *under the stars, defender, citadel, withstand, assault*. Then at the bottom of the page she wrote: *Aishe and Foxglove*.

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“Daisy, you’ll need to take this quickly, sweetie, back to Cypress. Do you know where you can meet her?”

Daisy nodded her head.

“It can wait until morning. I don’t want you going out tonight. Look what else I brought for you.”

Daisy rifled through the pack to find an old game she didn’t recognize. She shook the long thin box and heard the pieces within. Her eyes lit up to realize she’d have something to pass the time and play with her band of friends.

“It’s called checkers.” Gemma loved bringing surprises to Daisy to see the smile in her eyes. Nothing gave her more pleasure in her life than taking care of the child. Sometimes her friends in the Watch would bring her games or books found in the old houses in the area, knowing she was taking care of the children. “We have time to play one game and read one story before I have to go. Alright?”

“I wish you could stay here with me or I could go back with you.”

“I know you do, darling. I wish it too. More than anything. One day. Hopefully one day soon. But with as much as we’re being watched, I don’t want anything connecting you and me in case I’m captured. I couldn’t bear it if the Corsairs came after you. So, for now, this is how it has to be. But it’s what we’re fighting for. It’s why the people in the Watch do what we do so that one day, we won’t have to sneak around like this. You do understand don’t you, darling?”

Daisy held the tears back from her blue eyes with great effort and forced herself to look at Gemma with a smile. “I do.”

“Alright then. Which first? Game or story?”

“Game.”

