

# ~ The Destroyer ~

by Rhuarc Blac

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Disclaimer: These characters are original and mine. They are not based on anyone or anything.

Content Warning: There is very little depiction of violence or foul language; only what is necessary for the story and still it is pretty tame. There is no explicit sex although there are moments of closeness between the characters. I have to warn clearly that this is a first person perspective, in reality a person's thoughts, so some of it may appear abrupt and/or disjointed.

Description: In post-Armageddon earth, every day brings new dangers. As the Destroyer approaches, the White and her family must escape the wrath of the newest menace to attack their haven.

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The world ended twenty-seven years, four months and nineteen days ago. I know. I have counted each day since then. I sit here in front of the window and watch. It seems that watching is all I can do these days. The youngsters are training in the courtyard. I can see Simon and Fran, their grey hair silver in the moonlight, working on the gates. Tshao is walking around helping with everything, overseeing, being the leader he is. There are weapons all around. Groups are training on the fields beyond the compound. Sometimes I can see them look up before they turn back to their labours. I know what they are looking for. They are wondering for how long I will stay up here, in my self-imposed exile. Tshao comes by each evening. Every time he tries to convince me to come down, to go to council, to train the youngsters, to do something, anything, anything but sit here and look towards the horizon. Yet I will not. Not that I can't but I have no will to do so.

The Destroyer is coming. I watch the horizon day and night for the flags, the drums, the fires that will tell me the legions have come. It has been a week since the messenger came. In the blue and gold uniform that the children gaped at and I could only sit and look at. The message I knew would one day come. We are the last after all. The last of the rebels. All others are defeated, dead or bowed down. We should have been dealt with more than a year ago. A year ago, when our pitiful army was crushed on the banks of the river. For a year I have been here. Here watching the horizon, waiting. Waiting for the flags and the drums and the fires. Waiting for the world to end once more. Not the world, the big world, that one was destroyed long ago, but my world, the little world we managed to put together in the blackened out remains of the old one.

I can hear them speak sometimes, the youngsters. I have heard their hopeful whispers, their empty bravado. Empty? Ah, but it is empty, even if they don't know it. They say, oh if they only knew, that the fort is unbreachable. That we have food and fresh water. That we have strong walls and strong arms. That we can hold out. I don't have the heart to tell them otherwise, to tell them the truth. That our fort, their home, cannot hold. How could it? When the Destroyer brings forth the engines, no wall will be strong enough to keep the legions out. I see them even now, preparing for a siege, a war. What have we left? Youngsters, fuzzless cheeks and small breasts, and greybeards. The flower of our youth was lost at the river. Tshao wants me down there, I know. They look up to me, he says. Yet he is the leader. I know. I raised him for it. Still I know he is right. The youngsters desire the legend. They want to see the White among them.

I look at the corner of my dark room. There it stands. The armour that gave me my name, the armour that has become legend. The white armour with the silver wings. They call me the White but I can still hear another voice calling it, and me, Angel. Your voice. It has stood there, collecting dust and cobwebs, for a year. A long, long year as I wait. And still the days stretch in front of me. I want to rip my eyes out, never to see the flags and the fires on the horizon. My heart longs for the flags and the fires and the sound of the drums.

I wanted to ask the messenger what it would take. Would my head on a platter be enough? But I could not. The poor woman would not answer me, another helpless victim in the Destroyer's web. Her words still echo in my ears, "Lord Tshao, greetings. The Commander shall be visiting you within the month. The Commander expects the gates of Fort Hope to be open for the legions' arrival". No more was said. I could hear Tshao and the council debating endlessly, night after night, what the message within the message meant. None of them could see the simple truth, not even those who should know better. There was no message hidden within the messenger's words. The Destroyer never hinted, never cajoled, never threatened underhandedly. How could they all forget so easily? The words were clear and the message clearer. The Destroyer is coming and the gates had better be open for the legions' arrival. No more, no less. No hidden messages, no more than what the messenger said. The threat was clear. Yet I merely sit here listening to them argue night after night. What could I say? They should know better and I cannot find it in my heart to remind them.

I wish I believed in god. Then maybe I could pray. Then maybe I could ask why and get an answer that does not make my heart bleed. Something about fate or some grand plan or even the sins of some past life. But I do not believe. I stopped believing that day. Yet still I long for an answer. How did we end up like this? Me, here, sitting looking at the horizon. The Destroyer somewhere out there, coming closer with every passing moment. I long for an answer that does not spell weakness, my weakness, my fault. But no such answer exists. How could it? It was after all my weakness that brought me here.

I see the pain in Tshao's eyes and I have to turn away. He never blames me, my sweet boy. Yet he sleeps alone at night, Sarah lost in the madness of battle somewhere along the river's edges. He has lost all hope of her being alive. How could he not? Everyone knows that the Destroyer takes no prisoners. He asked me tonight what I was thinking. I looked at him and could not answer. What could I answer? That I am thinking in circles? In the desperate hope that some day the children will understand. Somehow find it in their hearts to forgive me? That is my hope, my one and only hope at salvation. A foolish hope. How could they forgive me? If only... a thousand if onlys clutter in my mind. And my heart's betrayal? How could that ever be forgiven? Every sundown that passes without flags, without drums, without fires I sigh in relief. Every sundown that passes without flags, without drums, without fires my heart clenches in disappointment.

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The knock on my door was different. It spelled doom. When Tshao came in, I knew. My eyes

left him to look once again at the horizon. Night has fallen but there seems to be a light over the hills. How could I have missed it? His words were short and staid. They have come. The Destroyer has arrived. There are no drums and no flags and no fires this night. That will come tomorrow along with the roar of thousands of booted feet moving in unison as the legions crest the hills and come into our little secluded valley. The voice that makes my knees weak sounds loud in my memory, " 'Tis a beautiful place, ain't it, angel?".

A part of me, a small clinical voice in my mind, observes my thoughts with distaste and wonders. Will I ever get to the point? Is this the legacy I want to leave the children? Will there be any children left tomorrow to even receive my legacy? My heart dies even at the thought. I have heard the rumours all these year and I know them to be true. No prisoners. The Destroyer takes no prisoners.

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In my head I write words. There is no paper. I remember paper. I remember it dimly but I remember it. It would be nice to write you a letter. A letter you could read. But there is no paper. And no way for you to read it. You are gone. And now the Destroyer is here. Tshao looks at me with fear in his eyes. And Marie has the look of death on her face.

You wrote me a letter once. I still have it. A paltry few lines telling me you were not coming home that evening. We had fought but then again we always fought. I think you wanted to leave that time, truly leave. But you did come. As the world collapsed around us, you did come. Like a shining knight, you came for me. I remember seeing the blood running down your face. The scar it eventually became was only the first of many. I remember asking you why you had come back. I had been so certain you would have preferred to stay with whatever little thing had caught your fancy that time.

I remember your answer. The anger in your eyes, for the first time I realised it was with yourself not with me. Your voice growling from the smoke that seemed to cover everything as far as the eye could see. The words that seemed to come out of your mouth dragged, "Because I love you...you... Fuck it!". I kept those words in my heart. It was not the first time you said you loved me. But it was the first time I actually believed it. For once you were not smooth or cocky; I could see the fear in your eyes as you barged in the house, I saw the relief when you saw me standing there trying to throw some things together.

Marie's voice sounds loud in my ears. I thrust the sound away. She has your temper our little girl. But the words have little meaning. I know what they want. I heard Tim's hasty plan. A way to leave, a way to escape. Salvation thrown in the mix at the last moment. Part of me screams to move quickly, that not even a moment must be lost. Another sniggers quietly wondering what the point would be. The Destroyer would find us, would find me anywhere. But I have to try. A break through the lines, Tim says. Even if it's only a lie, wishful thinking, I'd prefer dying on my feet with a sword in my hand than here waiting for the soldiers to come and drag me away.

I don't even realise the curt gesture that makes Marie stop talking. I can hear my own words

telling them to get ready and I can barely recognise my voice. It is gravely from disuse, it sounds so much like yours that it tears my heart apart to hear it. But I have a responsibility. If there is a chance for the children to escape then I will take it.

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The road is dusty. It is not even a real road, not that there are any real roads any more. But this looks more like a goat track than anything else. Tim's lithe figure leads us through the night. I have taken the back. Tshao is livid but he does not dare say a word. Marie just looked at me and nodded. She is so much like you, our little girl. The children are important. And the Destroyer cares nothing about the children. It is me that the Destroyer wants truly. I have taken my decision already. There was really no decision to be made, nothing to be debated. If the soldiers find us, the children will escape. I trust Marie will lead them out. Sometimes I wonder what it would be like if you were here.

My mind plays tricks on me, horrible tricks. I have to remind myself constantly that if I look back I will not see you, that there is no smoke on the horizon, that the world ended a long time ago. Little Chrissy is fussing. She is too young to understand that we are running for our lives. Sometimes as I watch the children, I feel tears in my eyes. I love them so much. I wish you were here. I wish we could have watched our grandchildren grow.

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The night is cold. Six days on the road and my body feels abused. I can't help but smirk. We walked for the better part of five years back then as the world burned. Tonight as I sit by the tiny fire, I feel old. My legs ache, my back hurts. Every old wound seems to torment me. I look at Marie, she looks angry. She always looks angry these days. Running away eats at her heart as much as it eats at mine. Tshao and Tim are arguing. I will have to make a decision soon. Maybe I should let Tshao decide but in many ways he is too young. Tim's arguments make sense. Hide in plain sight. His plan makes sense and it will be the last thing the Destroyer expects me to do.

Tshao wants to go east, hide in the wilds. I can't allow that. The wilds are no place for the children. The wilds bring death. I have seen those few who venture out. They look barely human. I cannot accept such a fate for the children. As I hear my words, I know I am hurting him. I am too gruff, too short, too final. I regret it that I am hurting him. But I can't take my words back. Once the words fly out of your mouth, they are gone. But you know that don't you, babe? My words got us here, didn't they?

The night torments me. Not just this night, every night. Some days I cannot even remember what it was like to have a full night's sleep. As I try to find a comfortable spot on the bare earth, my memories torment me. If I close my eyes, I can feel yours arms around me. I keep them open by sheer will. I have cried every night as I wait for exhaustion to lull me into sleep. I will not cry this night. I will not.

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We are here. My eyes cannot believe what I am seeing. It is a city. A real city. Not like the cities of the old world. This actually looks clean. I catch myself shaking my head. I had expected many things but not this. Tim is speaking in hushed tones. About the construction. They need workers, he says. There are many people coming in. We will be lost in the crowds of workers. I nod at him even as Tshao frowns. I start walking towards the city. I can hear Marie's mumbled words and they spear my heart. I don't want to hear another word and I stretch my legs to get away. I can see the city. A dream come true.

There is a queue at the gates, soldiers in blue and gold stopping every traveller. I stand back, letting young Tim take the lead. I lower my head pushing the hood of my cloak over my face. I hope they will see no more than an old woman. My hands have other ideas as they clench in fists. It takes something out of me to stop from laughing aloud. You would have laughed as well. Even after all these years, the sword still fits snugly between my shoulder blades. The hours you spent measuring me, the hours you spent making the slim blade allow me to pass through the gates unknown. I have not slung it like that for more years than I can remember and certainly none of the Destroyer's guards would ever suspect.

The streets are full of people. There are guards all around. It looks peaceful. It feels peaceful. I shake my head. For a split second, I wonder whether I am dreaming. Maybe this is merely another nightmare. But the wind on my face feels real. So does the hand of the guard that grips my arm. I can feel the tension in the others. I look up at the guard. Her voice is friendly as she inquires where we are going. Tim jumps in explaining about trying for work in construction. Just another family looking for work. The guard nods and smiles before letting us go on further into the city. I can hear Tshao's sigh and finally I can breathe again.

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It feels odd as I sit here on the edges of the new construction. There are others here with me. I watch the children playing. It feels peaceful but something churns inside me. It almost feels like the world never ended. I stand here and watch the children playing, my grandchildren, our grandchildren. Sometimes it feels as if I can turn and see you next to me. There are guards of course all around but they do not spare me a second glance. I am just another face in the crowd. The irony almost makes me laugh but I force it down. I won't tempt fate.

The rumours make me smirk. The Destroyer is looking for the White. The guards cannot help but talk about the manhunt. I hear their boasts and bow my head to keep my smile hidden. The sword is still between my shoulder blades. Every morning I think of putting it away but the memory of your words stops me. Sometimes I catch one of the guards looking at me curiously. I forget sometimes that I am supposed to be an old woman and my stride lengthens, my fists clench. It makes me feel better the coldness of steel on my back. It feels like a part of you is with me, making me safe.

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Another day has passed. I smile at Marie as she wipes the sweat from her brow. She is looking more like you every day. The heavy work agrees with her. She looks tired but something of the

darkness in her eyes has lifted. At least until she hears something about the manhunt. I can see the darkness swirling in her eyes then. Tshao looks tired too as he hugs the children. His eyes are haunted. He feels responsible and he worries, I know it even if he says nothing. The city is full of rumours about the manhunt but we have heard nothing about our people. I can only hope that the Destroyer ignored them as soon as we were gone. I can only hope.

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The day has started dark. My heart beats erratically as I go about my errands. I take deep breaths. I don't know what has gotten into me this morning. If I didn't know better I'd say you are near. The back of my neck itches as if you are watching me. I could always feel you watching me. I blink and shake my head to chase the memories away. That is all they are, memories, just memories. As I near the construction site, I shiver. In my heart, I know something is wrong. Yet everything seems normal. My heart jumps as I see Marie and Tshao coming up the hill in the masses of workers. I thank the old man that has watched the children while I was away. Tshao's voice sounds happy as he hugs the children.

A wave of ice hits my chest and I turn around. Without thought, my hand finds the hilt of the sword. Beside me, Marie is alert, her fists clenching. Tshao's gasp is almost more than I can handle. The faces of the soldiers are closed as they appear out of the crowd. I draw my sword out and it glints in the fading sunlight. I can barely recognise my voice as I order them to save the children. It was too good to be true. I should have known better. At least I will get my wish. I'll die with a sword in my hand.

Tim's frantic cries assault my ears but his words make no sense. The guard captain laughs as he pushes Tim away. The guards' swords glint and I finally let my laughter burst from my lips. This is it. The end is here. I can only laugh. They move forward in a rush and I run to meet them. The order stops all movement but my own. I can hear the madness in my laughter as my sword descends in its deadly arc. I will go down but I won't go down alone. The blade that meets mine comes as a real surprise but these little guards have yet to see true fury. I am already turning to attack again but my blade is met once again. This little soldier of the Destroyer is good. I have to wonder why the others are standing still. If they attacked, I know I could last only so long. I dismiss the thought from my mind.

If they want to toy with the White, let them. The more I take with me the better. This little guard is good; every movement of my blade is met surely, competently. I wish I could see his face but all I can see is the sun glinting off his helmet. His movement takes me by surprise; it is brute strength that throws me a few steps back. I smile as I start slowly towards him again. I see his movement and slow my steps even more. His sword dips in acknowledgment and I nod at him. One-handed he lifts the helmet from his head and lets it fall to the ground. I have stopped, waiting for him to raise his head. I can almost hear you scolding me for not attacking immediately. I cannot help it truly and I know you understand even if you would have never done it yourself.

The soldier raises his head slowly and I want to scream. The sword falls from my nerveless

fingers. Your voice, deep and full of gravel, comes to me, "Hey, angel". You move forward slowly, deliberately. You are giving me time, I can see it in your eyes. Time for what? Time to recognise your face, the creases around your eyes that were not there before? Time to take in the changes, the new scar that adorns your chin, the hair that is not black any more? Time to bend down and take my sword up again? I don't know what you are expecting from me. From the corner of my eye, I can see the soldiers stiffening. They stand tall as if at attention. It takes me a second to realise that they are truly standing at attention. It hits me like a fist in the stomach. They do not see you. All they see is their leader, the Destroyer.

Just like that, you are standing in front of me. There is fire in your eyes and it burns me. I should speak but my throat has become a burning knot, I can only look at you. Your sudden stiffness alerts me before I see the movement from the corner of my eye. The tip of the sword that touches your throat I know better than anyone except you. Marie's voice sounds different, "Step away, you bastard. Step the fuck away". I can see the smirk that appears on your lips and it sends shivers down my spine. Still the words of warning do not come.

I can barely follow your movement. You have not lost it in spite of the grey in your hair. For a moment, you become a blur and like everyone else, I can only see the consequences of your actions. The thud of Marie's body as it hits the ground, the hiss of her breath as it leaves her lungs. I turn slowly; my heart has stopped. There is no blood on the ground, your sword glints silver no dark stains marring its shine as it rests on Marie's throat. I don't need to look at you to see the darkness in your eyes. I feel it coming off you in waves. Something in your stance loosens my throat. I have seen you standing like this so many times I cannot even count them. You never did take prisoners after all.

The croak that escapes my lips I can barely recognise as mine, "Don't". Your flinch makes something twitch inside of me. I can only breathe again when you slowly move back, step after careful step. When you turn to me, the breath that I was trying to take chokes me. Your voice is low unreadable, "Marie?". I can only nod for an answer; words have deserted me once again. Your chuckle is short and harsh but there is a glint in your eyes. Like a moth to the flame, I step towards you. The minute shake of your head stops me in my tracks. Your voice takes a different timbre as you order your guards. I watch them carefully as they step forward. They sneak glances at you, their faces sweaty and I can see the fear in their eyes. Your orders are short, curt, leaving no room for doubt.

The guard that steps up to me is hesitant. I watch his hand slowly extending to grasp my shoulder. Your growl makes sweat pop on his brow. He is young; I see it in his face. I turn my back to him as I step towards the children. Tshao is at their side, his eyes moving from soldier to soldier, his fists clenching, his nostrils flaring. I pat his arm wordlessly as I slowly pick up Chrissy in my arms. I turn back to the soldier that has been following me slowly. I look at him and motion him to lead on. The relief that floods his face almost makes me laugh. I can feel Tshao following and Marie's heavy steps echo in my ears. Chrissy is frightened too much even to fuss and I can only hold her close to my heart.

As we are led away from the construction site, I cannot stop myself. I look back beyond Tshao's pale face and Marie's glare, beyond the ring of guards surrounding us. You stand motionless,

your eyes closed, the glint of steel in your hands. I almost stop and turn back. Your eyes snap open and lock with mine. A flush creeps up my face as you warn me with your eyes. As always, you read me too well. I turn from you and walk on.

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I sit silently in the middle of the large room. You have surprised me once again. I was expecting a cell, a nice cell maybe but a cell nonetheless. The suite of rooms the guards have brought us to is a surprise. There were no words as they led us inside. I waited patiently for the sound of the door locking but the door merely closed behind us. I don't have to open the door to know there are guards outside. I sit silently as Tshao fusses over the children. Marie is looking at me, the hurt in her eyes is almost too much for me to face. The knock on the door makes them tense. They stand quickly, their eyes travelling between me and the door. I stand slowly. It takes such effort to walk. I can hear my sigh as I open the door. I can feel my eyes growing wide as I take in the man standing there. I don't know how long I stand there looking at him. His careful clearing of the throat reminds me where I am, who I am. Slowly I step back motioning him to enter.

He steps in carefully. I cannot stop the sadness from flooding my face as I take in his limp and the black walking stick he leans on heavily. He smiles sadly at me and I know he has seen my sadness. I whisper his name and he bows his head. His eyes search my face as we stand a few feet apart. He turns slowly to look at the others; his smile warms as he takes in the children playing on the couch. He shakes his head before turning back to me. His voice is a whisper, "And would your door be open this evening, Anj?".

I know what he is asking but the question takes me by surprise. What games are you playing? My answer jumps from my lips before I can stop it, "This is not my door to bar it, Baron". His face falls and I regret my harsh words. His sigh is sad as he looks at me. As always he picks his words carefully, "This place is yours, Anj. This house. This city. Everything you can see to edge of the horizon is yours". I shake my head at his words. I can feel Tshao and Marie looking at me with horror in their eyes. They don't understand. I am not certain I understand either. Baron turns back to the door, he walks slowly, his limp pronounced. He stands at the door and turns back to me, "I need an answer, Anj", he says regret clear in his voice. I can only nod in acquiescence. What other answer can I give you? Relief floods his face and I can see the tears in his eyes before he turns and walks out the door.

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The night is silent as I sit and watch the fire burn. The children are long asleep. Tshao snores softly from the couch. He is tired, drained. Marie paces in front of the fireplace as she has done since Baron left. She does not speak to me and I can give no answer to the questions in her eyes. I sit hearing the fire crackle and the steps of the guards outside the door. The knock on the door is almost too soft to hear. My heart races at the sound. Marie is looking at me, the questions blazing in her eyes. I cannot answer her.

I stand slowly, my feet drag as I walk to the door. I open it trying to still my trembling hand. I cannot raise my eyes, I can feel your eyes on me and they burn. I step back willing you not to



speak. I can hear the soft steps you take as you come in. You do not walk further as I close the door. And I cannot move another step. My body stands still as my heart bursts in my chest. Your hand is warm when you touch my cheek and my body betrays me as it has always done and I lean into your caress. I lose the feeling of time and the floor beneath my feet as I feel your fingers tugging a lock of hair away from my face.

I shiver when you gently raise my chin until I look into your eyes. You are intense as always, your eyes blazing. But it is the sheen of wetness in them that breaks my heart. My hands have a will of their own as they touch your face. My heart skips a beat as a tear falls upon my fingers. I cannot stop the tears that I have been holding for hours and a sob racks through me. Your arms come around me fast and hard and I want to wail but only a whimper escapes through my tears. I break down when I feel the heart thudding in your chest and my knees become jelly. I can only hang on to you and you hold me hard against you, your chest heaving. It takes me a moment to realise that the small tremors that run through your body are the sobs that you try to keep inaudible. I don't know what to do, I can only cry harder. If this is another dream, I don't think I will be able to go on breathing when I wake up.

I don't know how much time has passed. I feel drained, empty. Your arms are all that keep me upright. Your hand gently massages the small of my back; your forehead rests on the top of my head. I swallow hard trying to find words but your whisper stops me, "Shh... Don't speak, angel". I nod silently against your chest. You carry me like a babe in your arms and I bury my face in your shirt. The clearing of a throat reminds me that we are not alone and I can feel the stiffness in your arms immediately. I stiffen too but you don't let me go, your arms tightening around me. You turn slowly and I have to turn my head when I feel the growl that starts deep in your throat. Marie's eyes blaze with anger, her mouth is working soundlessly.

For the first time since the guards appeared in the construction site, fear paralyses me. I know our girl, she is headstrong, quick to anger and her tongue can flay you to the quick. Worse, I know you. Anger courses through your veins in lieu of blood. I try to speak but not even a whisper can escape the knot that chokes me. You feel my effort and your arms tighten even more around me. Would you protect me even from my own daughter? I know you would. I know you will even if it destroys you. I swallow convulsively but finally I manage to push the words from my lips. "Marie, not now please. Tomorrow. I promise, tomorrow", I am begging and I know it. You know it too and you growl your anger, your eyes darkening with fury. I sigh in relief when Marie turns away abruptly.

Now all I have to do is hold you back. My palm finds the centre of your chest; I feel your heartbeat racing beneath my splayed fingers. You don't look down upon me but I can see your curt nod in the shadows cast by the flames. Slowly you turn once more and walk on. As you deposit me on the middle of the bed gently, I look up. There should be words but I can find none. Your eyes search my face even as your fists clench. My body again takes the step my mind refuses to take. My hand opens as my heart wills you to bend this once. I can only watch as the hard lines of your face soften and you sit on the bed carefully.

My hand trembles as I touch your arm, I know I cannot press you, I never should have pressed you in the first place. But I know you know what I am asking. You always could even when rage

made you deaf to my words. I can see your pulse fluttering at your throat as you lie down slowly. We lie there for long moments. You looking at the ceiling, your breathing erratic. Me on my side, trembling so hard I think I will never stop. I can hear your soft sigh and it feels like my heart will burst when you turn to me. You do not speak as you put your arms around me gathering me in. I let my head fall on your chest; your breath caresses my hair. I am afraid to close my eyes, afraid that when I open them again in the light of day you will be no more than a fancy brought on by the night's shadows. Your whisper is so soft I almost don't hear it, "Sleep now, angel. Sleep. I'm here". My eyes close of their own accord. I fall asleep listening to your breathing.

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I'm afraid to open my eyes. I can feel the warmth of your arms around me and I'm afraid. Are you merely the lingering essence of a dream? I sit, eyes closed, heart thudding in my chest. I have almost convinced myself that none of this is real when your soft caress surprises me. My eyes open involuntarily only to find yours. A small smile plays on your lips and your eyes shine, my lips smile reflexively. You move so fast your mouth swallows my surprised yelp as you kiss me. You burn your mark on me and I return it with every ounce of pain and regret I have suffered all these years. When you move away, I gasp for breath and you bow your head as you gulp in air. My treacherous hands touch your bowed head ruffling hair that shines silver instead of lustrous black. For some reason I cannot fathom, you allow my caress for long moments before you retreat away from me.

I watch you as you shake your head and stand up. My breath hisses in surprise when you offer me your hand. I take it even if I cannot disguise my trembling. What do you want? I am on my feet at your side but you have not let my hand go. You turn with precision and move on but slowly enough for me to follow your movement with ease. I see where you are headed and my breath catches. They are all still asleep, Tshao on the couch, Marie on the rug in front of the fire, the children on the large bed. You stop at the foot of the bed and I don't need you to speak to know your question. I whisper the names you crave and my hand is crushed between your fingers.

You hiss in surprise at the end and your eyes drill into me. I bow my head; I cannot answer your unspoken question. You already know the answer or you would not have asked. "Thank you", you whisper leaning towards me. I shrug even as my cheeks flame. I had insisted and neither Tshao nor Sarah dared tell me no even if they could not understand. You move away slowly turning to look at our children. Your face becomes unreadable and I wonder what you are thinking. I open my mouth to speak but you shake your head before I make a sound. I clamp my lips shut immediately, I fear you right now.

You used to love them once but I am certain you did not even recognise them yesterday. Do you see them as you did once or merely as enemies, as leaders of the rebels? You squeeze my hand once, your question leaves me trembling, "Do they treat you well?". I know what you are asking. I can hear the rage bubbling just underneath the surface. I fear your reaction, your anger but I need to find the words, the words that will destroy us both. I become forceful; I turn you towards me abruptly. Anger flashes in your eyes but you do not fight me.

Here we are. Not you and me but the White and the Destroyer. In a way I cannot mind. This drama could play out in no other way. I have what I wanted, what I wished for more years than I want to remember. A night in your arms. My voice deepens, becomes cold, the voice of command that sounds so much like yours, "I led them. They followed the White. Do not dare think I am not who I am". The rage plays in your face and your body stiffens. Laughter bubbles inside of me but I force it down. I do not want to laugh but you have taught me too well. I am used now to laughing my fear away. Even if it does not leave my lips, I can see you hear it. You close your eyes and my breath catches in surprise. I expected your hands around my throat not this. I never thought you would try to control your anger. Why? Why?

When you open your eyes, they shine. You nod at me as if in understanding. What game are you playing? I know you don't understand. You never did. If you did, you would not be who you are and I would not have become who I am. Your words hit me like a fist in the gut, "We will talk about this". Talk about what? I do not understand. You should be angry right now. Angry enough to kill me. But you merely stand, your eyes searching my face. You turn abruptly and I wonder whether this is it. But you merely walk toward Tshao as he sleeps still.

My heart leaps to my throat. I run to you ready to fight. This is your son even if you do not feel him. I will not let you hurt him no matter what. Your whisper stops me in my tracks, my mind takes long moments to process your words, "He seemed weak to me". I look at you trying to fathom your meaning. I spy your hand as it rubs at your throat. Finally I understand. I need to explain but what words will make you understand? Maybe the truth will serve us better. Maybe you will understand the truth. Maybe.

I speak slowly willing you to listen. "He feels guilty. He did not want us to fight". I can feel your sneer even if I cannot see it. I try again, "He is a good leader. He believes in peace". You motion your disdain, "He could have fought me". I shake my head but I try once more, "His children come first. Especially since Sarah...". I stop just in time. I don't want to antagonise you. Not over this. It is your fault as much as mine but I can bear this burden for both of us. You turn slowly, so slowly that I blink wondering if I am imagining things again.

"What about Sarah?", your whisper takes me by surprise, there is something in your voice I cannot recognise. I cannot stop the sigh from escaping my lips. I had so wished to spare you this. I rush the words out, "Sarah is...was his wife. She died last year". I don't need to tell you where or how. I can spare you that much at least. Your eyes turn unreadable once again and you turn away from me.

I walk slowly until I stand next to you. I want to touch you but I fear you will not accept my touch. So I simply stand next to you. I look at where you are looking. She is a beautiful girl our daughter. I look up at you trying to gauge your reaction. There is a glint in your eyes, the same as yesterday, and finally I recognise it for what it is. I cannot help but smile, words are easier this time, "She is brave and strong. Smart too". A half-smile appears on your lips and you nod at my words. Your touch makes me jump in surprise.

Your grip on my hand is strong, strong enough to bruise. You look down at me and I can feel

your eyes. I wish I could stop myself but I can't, I raise my eyes until I can look into yours. As you slowly lean toward me, my heart hammers in my chest. Your kiss is not gentle, your kisses never are. The moan I hear makes me flush, it takes me a moment to realise it's me not you. You step back after that, a familiar glint in your eyes. It does something to me, something I thought I would never feel again. I bow my head; I don't want you to witness the desire in my eyes. Your whisper carries promise, "We'll talk later". I don't look up until I hear the door closing behind you.

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The hours pass slowly. Dawn has come and gone. The children have woken and like last night your guards bring us food. I stand in front of the window with Chrissy in my arms. I smile taking in the details. The window is larger than anything I've seen since the world ended and I can recognise Baron's ingenious work.

I can hear them fuming behind me even if they do not speak. They have not uttered a single word this morning. I do not blame them. How could I? I think they would have accepted anything but you. This house of yours has a fine view of the city. I drink in the sight. It looks beautiful in so many ways. Unfinished but beautiful still. The soft knock on the door makes me turn. For a moment I wonder but my heart tells me no. I motion at Marie to open as I turn back to the window and the vista outside. Probably another one of your guards bringing us lunch or something.

The sound of wood against wood makes me turn. Baron is standing tall just inside the door. His uniform of blue and gold contrasting sharply with his ebony skin makes my hackles rise. I nod at him in greeting and turn back to the window. I do not want to look at him; he is not Baron, merely another one of the Destroyer's cronies. I can hear his steps as he walks to me. His bulk seems threatening as he stands next to me. Long moments pass in silence. His words are hesitant and I wonder why, "Would you like a closer look?". I shake my head negatively, "I've been there already".

I can feel his smile, "Just the lower fields you've seen, Anj. There is more than just the construction". I shift through his words and my hackles rise. I cannot keep the harshness out of my voice, "How long?". He sighs quietly, regret and something unfathomable in his voice, "Ever since you came". My heart feels like ice in my chest but I nod nonetheless. I should have known. His voice is gentle, soothing, "Please, Anj. Just have a look around. You and the kids. I have arranged for the children". My eyes blaze as I turn to him. What games are you playing? You should know better than trying to take me away from the children.

As always Baron tries to convince with his mellow voice, "Come on, Anj. With the children if you want. Just come". He is begging, cajoling; that is the Baron I know. But beneath his words I can hear your voice. Your orders. I nod even if anger chokes me. Baron will not disobey you. Part of me feels betrayed. Another as always finds the good in you. You could have sent your guards, you sent Baron instead.

Tshao looks ready to protest when I turn; a muscle twitches in Marie's jaw. I leave them no

choice. My words are short and harsh and once more they do not dare disobey me. The harshness in my voice frightens Chrissy but she quiets down almost immediately. I follow Baron out of the room the others following in our wake. Guards fall around us as soon as we exit the door. Baron tries to put a gentler face on it all but I can recognise chains when I see them.

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I keep my eyes closed. Tshao and Marie are arguing in low tones; I can only try to ignore them. Tshao is angry, he feels deceived, betrayed. Marie, so much like you, remains unconvinced. It looks like a ruse to her. A noose in the Destroyer's hand, a noose of silk and velvet but a noose nonetheless. They are both right, they are both wrong. I cannot find the strength to tell them.

The images play on the inside of my eyelids. Who would have believed it? I certainly wouldn't, not if I had not seen it with my own eyes. The books, thousands upon thousands of them, were almost too much to bear. And it was only the beginning. The day replays in my mind and for the thousandth time my breath catches. And over it all the memory haunts me.

I can almost hear my own voice trying to convince them. The dream of a new world built on the burnt out remains of the old. That knowledge not technology was the great legacy of the world that had collapsed around us. I so wanted to convince them, to make them take a chance. You had stood there silent, your support known. Had it been too early back then? Had it been too late already? I never could figure it out. Your words given in the privacy of the tiny room we shared had made me angry. We had fought once again.

My eyes snap open. Your words come back to me as if you are right here now, "What will hospitals and schools do? Are you so blind? The Marauders are real. You can't build anything if they come to burn it down!". The Marauders. I have not thought of them for years. Back then, they were the stuff of nightmares. We all thought it could not get worse than that. But then we had not yet seen the Raiders, the Lord's Glorious Army, the Sousearchers.

I stand so quickly the blood leaves my head and I have to fight the dizziness. With drunken steps, I go to the window. I can recognise the buildings now. The two hospitals, one of them with a school for doctors and nurses. The school and the library. Baron says teachers have already been trained and sent out. The grey building of the station where the power of the small river that flows at the edges of the city provides enough electricity for the few salvaged machines. The small building next to it. The school for mechanics. I blink tears from my eyes. A city. A dream city. My dream city.

Tshao's voice intrudes in my thoughts. He is almost shouting now. I can hear the hurt in his voice. The guilt he cannot disguise in his anger. He had never wanted us to fight. He is a diplomat more than anything else our boy. But still he fought the Destroyer with all he could give. The Destroyer that takes no prisoners, that burns and slashes, that conquers without thought or compassion. The Destroyer that builds hospitals and schools, that tries to find a civilisation we all thought lost forever. Marie's voice is ice. Ever the strategist, the soldier, she can see what I know and Tshao simply will never be able to see. Doctors and nurses and teachers, the carrot even as your legions are the stick.

I have to hear my voice to realise I am speaking. I am curt and harsh. I want them to stop. They can only see so much and I am too tired, too drained to tell them any better. The Destroyer's carrot. Your gift to me.

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I look at the food in my plate. In another time, another age, I would push it around, make out that I have eaten. In this world, I can't; food has been scarce as long as I remember. The others are eating; they know better than to refuse food. I look at the mash; the children love it. I am not certain I even want to know where you found butter when milk is so scarce.

The knock on the door is soft. They look at it and then at me before continuing with their meal. They think it is the guards again or maybe Baron, I know better. I stand slowly, my knees tremble as I come to answer your knock. I open the door and keep my head down. I am not certain I even want to see you right now. You do not come in even when I step away from the door. Finally I raise my head, I know your games. My eyes narrow as I take you in. You look resplendent in blue and gold. Every inch the Destroyer. The hilt of a sword peaks from behind your shoulder and I gape at the pistol in your belt. I wonder if it works still or is merely a trapping. I laugh at myself silently. Knowing you, it works to perfection.

Still you do not move although your eyes burn holes in me. I capitulate to your unspoken wish. Part of me does not want me to. But I know better. "Come in", I whisper. You nod your thanks and step in, your boots loud on the wooden floor. Every eye is on you and I can see you stiffen. I am not certain what to do. "Have you eaten yet?", I ask quietly. Your negative nod is curt. Are you nervous? No, of course you are not. You wouldn't know what nervous means. I walk to the table putting my seat out for you. You follow slowly and sit carefully. I take the seat next to you. It has been left empty, I think the others did not really notice but I knew the moment your guards put the table together.

Marie's eyes shoot daggers at you. Tshao is looking at his half-empty plate. The children are looking at you, wonder in their faces. Your eyes rake over all of them, your face a sculpture made of flesh and blood. Finally you take up the fork. I watch, my heart leaping to my throat, as you carefully make portions of the food on your plate. You eat slowly, deliberately. Everyone is watching but you seem unconcerned. You finish quickly.

You do not look at anyone but me as you move slowly putting the plate in front of me. I swallow, my throat dry, my eyes never leaving your face. I do not move and your eyes narrow. I take the fork, my hand trembles as I bring a morsel of food to my mouth. Your hand on my knee makes me shiver; your caress is soft. My heart thuds but my stomach settles a bit. I start eating slowly as you watch me. I know what you are doing but still it affects me.

How many times have we shared our meals exactly like that? I don't need to look to know you have left more than you have eaten. You always did, even if it makes no sense, you are bigger than me. When I finish the plate is clean and a half-smile plays on your lips. You squeeze my knee once. As you turn to the others, the smile leaves your face. You stand abruptly. Your boots

thud on the floor as you walk away to stand in front of the window.

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I watch you silently as you look at the lights of the city. You have stood there immobile for so long. The guards have come in, cleared the table, taken the leftovers away. You stood there immobile as Tshao put the children to sleep. In the other room, the one we had not dared use last night. You stand there still. I am sure you can feel the tension behind you. Marie's eyes are so dark to be almost black and Tshao is sitting with his eyes closed, his laboured breathing sounds harsh in the silence.

As I come to stand beside you, I will you to turn, to look at me. But you don't. Your eyes do not leave the city's lights. I stand beside you feeling the heat coming off you. I want to touch you but I fear your rebuff. Your voice comes as a surprise, it is almost too low to be heard by anyone than me. "Open the door. There is someone you would like to see". There has been no knock, so whoever it is must have been waiting for a good long time outside. I wonder who it could be. Many left when you left. Only some came back. The others followed you, as you became the Destroyer. Old friends, old enemies. I don't acknowledge you as I leave your side.

I open the door willing my face to stillness. I had prepared myself for any face but the one I see. I cannot stop the gasp that escapes my lips. I take a step back holding on the door to keep from falling. As she comes in, I blink thinking I am imagining things again. Marie's gasp echoes mine but Tshao makes no sound. His eyes are wide, his mouth working soundlessly. It is like a dance as they meet. I turn away trying to hide the tears in my eyes. The happiness, the wonder in Tshao's face is almost too much to bear. I look at you; you still have not turned. I walk slowly to your side trying to find words. A myriad questions churn in my mind but I can ask none of them. I merely take your hand in mine. I need to feel you right now. You don't deny my touch, gripping my hand tightly.

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We are alone for the first time in more time than I can remember. Tshao did not even speak when you ordered them both out of the room. I think my heart stopped beating when Sarah saluted you like your guards salute you. Only then did I take in her blue and gold uniform. Tshao has not yet noticed I am certain. There are questions for you to answer but now is not the time. Marie was not that easy but who would dare the ice in your eyes. I am afraid for her in a way. I don't want her to be alone. I know you have guards stationed with her but it makes me fear even more. They are protectors but they are jailers too. I know what Marie will see when she feels them around her.

Your words pull me out of my thoughts, "She'll be fine. Between them Nono and Liz can take care of anything". There is something in your tone that scares me. The question must be clear on my face because you chuckle immediately and nod at me. I don't know whether to laugh or cry. Just like you to arrange something like this. So unlike you to not get your hackles up at the thought of anyone sleeping with your daughter. I sigh in resignation.

We need to talk but as I study your face, I can see the tiredness in your eyes. It is late already. Still I can't stop, sitting in a limbo has never been my thing. "What now?", I whisper gaining your attention once more. Your eyes shine in the half-light of the fire. The voice that answers me I have not heard for more years than I can count. I can count the times you have spoken to me in this voice; they are that few. That day as the world collapsed around us. The first time we saw our little valley. The dawn after the children were born. The day you left. This voice I crave. This voice I dread.

It takes me long moments to comprehend your words and it feels like my heart will simply stop beating. I don't know why but you think that I have not heard and you repeat yourself slowly, "I was thinking. Maybe you'd want to stay here. You...and the kids". I finally manage to look at you. What I see makes me blink. I cannot be seeing what my eyes show me. You are waiting for me and I can see the sheen of sweat on your face. For the first time in my life, I see you nervous. You fidget, you never fidget but you are fidgeting now, playing with the buttons of your jacket. What can I tell you? What are you asking? The question leaves my lips before I can stop it, "Why?". You don't look at me for a moment and I feel ice in my heart. Have you been playing with me?

The thought comes into my mind and I shatter. Has your father's legacy caught up with you now? I want to die. I blurt it out without thought. What else can I do? "Is it your heart?". You look at me finally and there are flames in your eyes. You bite your words off, anger chilling your voice, "Must I be dying to want my family with me?". Your anger soothes me. I know your anger. The fire that burns in you. Still your words stun me. Why this elaborate rouse if all you wanted was this? Why send us a request we could not accept? Why now, after all these years? Why? Why?

It is not until I hear your words that I realise that I have spoken aloud. Your anger is such that it makes me tremble. The only thing that keeps me breathing is that it's not with me. "The bastard that sent you that idiotic order rotted away a year ago. Too many knew of your answer. I couldn't back down. The borders are secure but there is too much resentment. There is no place for weakness among the ruins, angel". I look at you wonder on my face. You are explaining to me. These are not empty words; I can see the glint of truth in your eyes. I can only nod at your words. You know I can't agree with you. But I can't deny your reasons either.

It surprises you my acquiescence and you search my face with narrowed eyes. How can I explain to you the years? It has been so long since you left. I have grown, my love. You were not there to shield me from the hard decisions. I could not be the light to your darkness any more. They call me the White, none would think of calling me Angel any more. I take your hand in mine feeling your warmth. We both have grown. In our separate ways. Who would have thought I would be leading soldiers into battle? Who would have thought you would be building hospitals and schools? I learnt to cry only at night and show a face of ice to the world. You learnt to control your anger and say the words you mean not merely those you want others to hear.

I can only sigh. Again words desert me. I know you better now than I did then. Words never left me then. Now I know what it is like to not find the words. I act as you would act now. I lean into you trying to tell you with my body what my lips cannot express. Your arm comes around my



shoulders drawing me in. Your kiss on my bowed head is so soft I almost don't feel it. I breathe deep taking your scent in. We still need to talk but I can't find it in me to speak now. There are things you need to know. There are things I need to hear from you. A waste of time. A waste of breath truly. But necessary still.

We need to talk. You and me. The Destroyer and the White. But for now I can give you my decision. I don't want to think about it. I am too old, too hurt, too tired to think about it. For once I will let my heart speak for me and let the world go to hell. Inside of me laughter bubbles, bitter and scorching. The world has already gone to hell and we live in it. "I'll stay. I don't know about the kids". Your arms tighten around me. Your whisper is the voice of the cloudless night, "Thank you".

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I stand against the window listening to your words. Your voice is even, cold, businesslike. You outline your plan with clear, concise words. They are listening to you silently. We are all listening to you. Tshao sits on the couch, his hand never leaving Sarah. Marie stands in front of the fireplace, leaning against the rough bricks. My eyes find Baron as he stands next to the door. You finish as you started with a look around the room. You lean back, arrogance exudes out of you. My eyes rake over you and I know what they cannot see. Your heartbeat betrays you as it pulses on the veins of your neck. You really want this. And what you want, you get. You are waiting for their answer but I know you, you won't wait for long. Or will you? Have you changed that much?

Tshao clears his throat but does not speak. He is thinking it over but I think I know his decision. I think you know it too. You could always read people well. The problem stands in front of the fireplace. I look at Marie and I fear. Her anger burns hot still. There are answers she wants. And by your speech I know you have no desire to give them. Marie's voice is cold, "Why should we trust you?". I see you stiffen imperceptibly and I can barely contain my wince. You breathe deep and once more, you surprise me as you try to contain your anger.

Your voice has no expression, "Why should you trust me? Why should I trust you? There are no givens in this life. I'm taking a chance with your brother and you. You are taking a chance with me". I expected orders or derision. Some underhanded threat. Not this. Surely not this.

Marie is opening her mouth to speak but you don't let her. Your hand rises in unspoken command and then you continue, your voice a thin sliver of ice. "You did well with your little company of bandits. You can go back there if you wish. It'll take you a bit of time to get back into the game. Eventually you'll do me some damage. And then my legions will come once again. And they will hunt you down and destroy you. No requests this time. No mistakes. In a couple of years we will be standing like this again but then all I will offer you is death. Or you can take me up on this offer. In a couple of years we will be standing like this again but instead of a noose, I'll be offering you a district. Your choice". Your words wash over me. I can't breathe. This cannot be true. It cannot be true.

I step forward without thought. My eyes are looking desperately for the denial that I need. It

cannot be true. There must be some mistake. My daughter's eyes slid over my own falling to the ground. It is true. It is true. How did you know? How did I not even suspect? I catch Baron's eye as my eyes look for a way out and he nods, sadness etched on his face. The rustle of cloth and iron as you stand drags my attention back to you. Your steps are slow, deliberate as you walk to the fireplace. Marie is not looking at you, her gaze is fixed on some unimaginable point. How many times have I seen her exactly like this in the last year? I have wondered again and again what she is seeing. Now I know. She is seeing carnage and battle. The frozen expression on her face is not sadness but guilt. How could I not see it? How could I let this happen?

The room is still and your low words carry. Your voice holds a harshness that makes my heart clench. What you are saying is important in some way I cannot understand. I can hear the pain in your voice. "They were deserters. They were caught on the other side of Nought's Luck. They were dealt with. Accordingly. So were the idiots that let them through Three Bridges". You stop and I can read the hesitation in the bunching of your shoulders. Something plucks at my thoughts and I know I am missing something. Something important.

Marie tosses her head. Her eyes flash with anger as she looks at you, defiant. Her words drip with venom. "Don't you dare". You stiffen and my mind shrieks in fear. You surprise me again when you take a slow step backwards. The tiny inclination of your head makes me gasp. I have never seen you retreat before and it rocks my being. Your words are low. I am surprised you are even making the effort. "I wouldn't. What blame is to cast is mine. But bandits on the road won't bring me down. You'll need legions for that".

The challenge in your voice is clear. I shiver. I can hear the odd tone underneath your arrogance. Despair. Resignation. Our daughter's eyes look at you smouldering. Her nod is curt, one enemy to another. You nod back. The deal is made and I want to scream. What are you doing? I want to trust you. That you know best in this. But I can't. I fear for you too much.

You turn your back to Marie and I shiver. Power exudes from your very being but as I search your face, I see sadness. You walk towards the door and Baron. He straightens immediately, a barely suppressed twitch of his lips tells me he knows more than I. Tshao's question stops you. "Who are you?". You turn slowly, so slowly. You do not look at him, your eyes are on me and for once they don't burn. The question is clear on your face. My decision is made in a split second. I don't have time to think about it. I don't want time to think about it. I step towards you and immediately you shake your head. I don't miss the flash of relief that transforms your face. I want to laugh. I ignore your silent order and walk to your side.

The widening of your eyes is too slight for anyone but me to notice. I stand beside you. As I open my mouth to speak your curt gesture stops me. All eyes are on us. Let me take this burden, it is mine after all. I can bear it; I have born it all these years. I plead you with my eyes. But you don't let me take this fall. Deep inside I think I knew you wouldn't. "Once they called me Fire".

Tshao's breath hisses in surprise. Sarah is on her feet, her eyes wide, incredulity written on her beautiful face. Marie is stepping back as if hit. Tears glisten in Baron's eyes. They know you now. They have spent their lives listening about you. Not from me. Never from me.

You are a legend still in the valleys. How could you not be? Our children have grown up listening about you. Along with the memory of the world that was once, they have known your legend. Your journey through the ruins of a world gone mad. The journey that gave you your name and spread the seeds of your fame. The journey that made people call you a hero. A dark hero, a hero of blood, a hero of the broken, the mad, the lost. A hero of our world, this new world, a broken world, a mad world, a lost world.

They know about the dawn that you stood on the rise atop Nought's Luck and saw the valleys for the first time. They know how you stood there and saw a chance, a chance for a haven. They know how you started building that haven with your own bare hands. You could have gone on. You could have done what so many others had done. You could have become another warlord, another warmonger among the many. But you didn't.

They know the haven you built was a tiny place. They know how others came to that haven. Some came to be saved. You welcomed them with no question. Others came to destroy. Those you destroyed with no hesitation, no compunction, no mercy. They have heard all about the Marauders. How in fear everyone bowed down to terror. How you alone stood your ground and started a war. A war you won. A victory that proved that the valleys were a true haven.

And they know too how when the Raiders poured through the eastern passes, you left. You left alone but others followed. And you stood at the passes and the Raiders fell back, defeated. They know that you never came back. They believe that somewhere on the icy passes you lie still, another body among the many.

There are so many things they don't know. So many things they don't even suspect. I have never spoken of you in all these years. My silence was never questioned. They think they know why. It is part of your legend. The legend of Fire. Angel's Fire. They think I have mourned you all these years. And now they know. There is no body frozen still in the passes. Fire died in the Eastern Passes. In the same passes that the Destroyer was born. The Destroyer that pursued the Raiders deep into their own territory. That conquered them. That destroyed them. The Destroyer. You.

Your eyes have never left me. You don't look at them. You look at me with the same eyes that looked at me so long ago. They are cold, cold as ice. But there is the same tiny glint in them, the glint of fear. I turned my back to you then thinking you would try. Thinking you would stay. Stay with me and our children. Your footsteps as you turned and left echo still in my memory. Left to fight. Fight for me and our children. I know what you fear. You fear I will turn from you once again. But I have grown, my love. I have grown. I am no angel anymore. I have fallen. I don't let my eyes leave yours as I step forward. Long seconds pass before you breathe and I take the tiny step that will bring me to touch you. Your arms come to hold me and I relax into your embrace.

I feel you leaning down until I can feel your breath on my face. You whisper my name and I can feel your lips moving against my skin. I raise my head in sudden trepidation, I need to see you. All of you. My eyes search frantically without thought the harsh planes of your face. The weather-beaten cheeks. The full mouth. The scars that mar your beautiful face. Your eyes, the colour of the summer sky. You look at me and I can feel you stiffen. You are here. I can see you.

All of you. All your names are written on your face. In another world, a world long gone, they called you Player. Half admiration half envy. You had an edge, something that brought forth both fear and lust. You still have it. I can feel it in my speeding heart and the weakness that assaults my knees.

But we were naïve then. Our world was a small world, a world of peace and small concerns. Your Player's edge is still here but it's tempered in ways none would have ever imagined. I can see the fire in you. The burning anger. Your mind teetering at the edges of destruction. They called you Fire those that we met on the long road. The world burned around us and your eyes reflected the flames. Even when the flames petered out and the smoke cleared to reveal a changed earth, the fire never left your eyes. It still burns as you look at me.

Now they call you by another name. They call you the Destroyer. There is a harshness in you now that had not been there before. There are shadows in your eyes. Hard decisions darken your soul and your will closes like an iron fist over the territories.

I see you, all of you. And beneath the faces of the names of others, I see you. It is still there. That you have always hidden from the eyes of others. Carefully I put my arms around your waist. You stiffen for a moment and then relax. Your head bows till your forehead touches me. You are still here. Bedraggled and shy. Hiding behind the faces you show to the world. Blue eyes the colour of darkened seas peak behind broad shoulders. I bury my face in your chest. Finally I am home. And so are you. I breathe your name; no one will hear me but you. "Christine".

The end

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Thanks for reading. Any comments, good or bad, are welcome at [rh.black@hotmail.co.uk](mailto:rh.black@hotmail.co.uk) ~RB.

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