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AFTERGLOW

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by Chrys Romeo

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The Prison

Everything happened so fast, events rolled out from one another overlapping time and scenes, like loops engulfing each other in fast forward speed.

Thomas was an aspiring pilot in the army, but one late autumn day or early winter, he couldn't recall exactly, he saw himself like in a dream, being taken up inside a van, handcuffs on, feet dragging along and stumbling on the high steps of the vehicle, a hand pushing his head down to bow for the entrance, the edge of the door and then the hard shuddering sound of heavy locks. The engine coughed, the winding streets swept by in unexpected turns, and then he was taken inside a detention center of a town he barely knew or recognized. He didn't have time to look around. He was instantly brought into a bright room with gray metal walls and white sliding doors where everything smelled of chemicals, disinfectant and dangerous instruments. He was told to strip completely.

“Everything?”

“Everything.”

The order left no space or time for explanations and choices. Thomas complied, taking off his clothes to the last piece that might have given him some dignity, as if he had to throw away many layers of who he was, becoming vulnerable and exposed to the naked truth

of not having the option to decide what was going on.

He went through the quarantine shower and then was given a navy blue outfit that he had to jump in quickly. He was told to wait for the medical check-up. Then the doctors came. One tall man and one short and slim girl, both wearing uniforms, staring at him attentively, carrying files with data about him. Looking at the girl, Thomas immediately wondered what a female doctor was doing in a military prison for men. He sneaked a glance at her badge. "*Isabel*" he read silently.

The tall imposing doctor spoke with authority, as if evaluating his x-ray, while Isabel kept watching:

"We'll just check a few things for the records."

He stood there as they did routine consultations: blood pressure, breathing, heartbeat, eyes and reflexes. Then they left and the guards came to take him to a cell with other three detainees. He just sat there on the bed, looking around, as the others started to chat. Thomas still felt dizzy from the snowballing events that had rolled by too fast for him to wrap his head around them. He heard the questions as if through some dissipating fog, coming from somewhere far away:

"What are you here for? What did you do?"

He blinked, recollecting his thoughts to answer:

"I drove under the influence. I was coming from a birthday party and it was raining, so the road was slippery. It seems I hit a military truck with ammo. The crash ruined many boxes of that load. Stuff got

broken..."

"How much did they give you for it?"

"Seven months."

"No way! Why so much?"

He shrugged.

"Well, apparently running into a truck was not the only thing I did. I also got into a fight with the officers that were on that truck. They were higher rank and I ignored that. They didn't forgive me and sent me to martial court."

The inmates laughed.

"Boy, what a troublemaker! You've been having fun, haven't you."

"I don't remember all the details of that night. I wasn't very clear headed. I lost my cool in the heat of the moment, so one thing led to another... after that, here I am."

"Guess your career in the army is over. You'll have to reorient yourself in a new field."

"Yeah... too bad I wanted to be a pilot on one of those supersonic eagles."

"Ouch. That must hurt you."

Thomas knew he had to consider it eventually, but for the moment he didn't want to think about it – freedom seemed somehow far away, unreal, illusory.

"What other skills have you got besides running into trucks?" the

detainees joked, giving him pats on the back.

“Give me hi five! You've got some nerve to wreck that truck and defy the officers too!”

He tried to divert the focus of the conversation from himself:

“What about you guys? What did you do?”

“Never mind about us... let's say armed robbery to a bank. We took millions and billions and stashed them under a mattress.”

“I don't believe you.”

“Look, we'll share some of it with you if you dig us a tunnel outta here...”

They were laughing so hard it was no point in continuing the discussion reasonably. He lay his head on the pillow and allowed his thoughts to wander. He had all the time in the world to sort out everything. Yet for some reason, the doctors' visit had remained in his mind – and especially her. The girl's presence in that place was contrasting like a colorful flower springing from the cement of the sidewalk, a daring little tree growing on the dry edge of a cliff above an abyss, a golden light streaming through dark menacing clouds or a white immaculate seagull floating gracefully and skillfully on furious stormy waves. She was, no doubt, strong enough to face that environment. Thomas could see her training was showing in her determined posture, the precise gestures and the steel glance that would cut through the room – but there was something delicately unpredictable underneath her active professional attitude: a restless

alert attention, something like a sensitive perception in gentle refined understanding of the most subtle aspects of a situation. He could almost swear that she knew how he felt, without asking anything, just by looking at him observantly. She seemed different from that environment because, unlike the uniform she was wearing, she actually felt more than nothing during the automatic consultations: her beating heart and sensitive eyes were hiding warmth that made her more alive than the others around. She was not made of stone, despite the impersonal attitude. Thomas felt that about her and wished he could see her again. He wondered what he could do to get to the medical unit. He had just arrived there, but was already making plans in his mind how to reach that unusual flash of sunshine, that breath of spring in that dark and strict place.

As he was resting his head on the pillow, he closed his eyes and dozed off. His sleep was short and uneasy. He had a dream where he couldn't distinguish if the visions were real or not, impressions reaching his perceptions in a flood of unexpected sensations. He was flying a plane through clear blue sky. The freedom expanded, so overwhelming, and he was genuinely essentially happy. It wasn't just the total detachment from the earth, from any worries, from any burden of reality. It wasn't just the endless sky, the immense space and the complete liberty of movement: he had a sense of safety, a strong certainty that everything would be positively great and the outcome of any situation, of anything from his future would only be beneficial

to his life, no matter what would happen. And he also knew that Isabel was on that plane with him, and the feeling of happiness was deeply connected to her presence. He smiled at her, as the plane was rising above cotton candy white clouds. She smiled back at him, but the vision was interrupted abruptly.

“Time for lunch Thomas! Stop dreaming and wake up!”

He opened his eyes to find himself back in the cell, which seemed like a steep fall from a bright height where he felt he would rather remain. The desolation was soon replaced by plans: Thomas decided he wasn't going to just sit around resigned about his fate. He was going to do his best for that dream of seeing her again to come true.

In the following months he requested to work in various places in the prison facility. He figured if he did well, he would later be given a chance to ask for a favor and would be allowed to talk to her. Besides, they might also let him off sooner if he worked hard.

At first, he was admitted in the tool shed, where he could carve and assemble pieces of furniture: window frames, chairs, curtain bars, coffee tables. Working with wood wasn't very hard, but it requested attention, persistence and notions of geometry. He integrated in the carpenters team quickly and after a while of carrying things around they trusted him enough to let him use sharp or heavy tools. Things were going well when he had an incident with a coffee table. The chainsaw that was supposed to cut the board slipped. The chain was loose, it jolted, got stuck in wood and then suddenly slid off and cut

through his arm. The sight of flooding blood sprinkling through the open wound in an instant alarmed the guards immediately. Thomas put down the chainsaw and tried to keep the flesh closed, covering the cut with his hand. However, blood was flowing beneath his fingers, splashing down on the planks of wood, the floor and everywhere he turned.

“You've got to go to the emergency room” the guard said and grabbed his elbow, dragging him along the corridor.

He was already calm when the door of the medical unit opened and the guard shoved him in. His heart started racing in a second, finding himself face to face with Isabel, just one meter away. She saw his arm and briefly picked some instruments. For a moment, she looked in his eyes and the direct glance went straight to his soul, as if she really saw him and who he was, beyond the prisoner status he had. The bright flicker in her eyes flashed instantly, as intense as lightning in a clear blue sky. Then she averted her stare, but the vision still remained in his heart: a sense of endless happiness and freedom like the absolute blue sky in his dream.

Isabel did what was necessary to close the wound and bandage it. He kept watching her in a daze, smiling in his mind while discovering how beautiful everything about her could be, the way she moved and the way she just stood there by his side, preoccupied by determined actions that needed to be done.

“How did this happen, Thomas?” she asked without looking at

him.

She knows my name, he thought ecstatically. It sounded so reassuring to hear his name spoken by her voice, as if there was something familiar and new at the same time that he was learning about himself, from her. Just her simple presence made everything seem different: suddenly, it was no longer the same building, the same room, the same town or the same world. Everything had moved, reinvented and renewed itself into another level where light, warmth and safety were spreading around undeniably, overflowing, lifting and erasing the boundaries of reality. He realized it was all because of her: that brightness, that calm and sense of safety, that reliable invisible guarantee that things would be better, a certainty that life was full of light and hope. He remembered she had asked something.

“The chainsaw was not adjusted in tension and it slipped”, he explained simply.

She wrapped the bandage tightly.

“Don't worry, it will be alright.”

Thomas had no doubt about it. Her presence was enough to ensure that.

He enjoyed every second of being in the same room with her. Time could have stopped and it wouldn't have mattered.

Leaving the medical unit a few minutes later, he felt as if he had also changed into someone new, along with the reality around him. He walked lightly, as if stepping on fluffy clouds and his mind was

serene, his spirit exalted and redeemed as if he had been saved in a way he couldn't explain. He felt lifted above the restrictions of the building, away from anxiety and dark thoughts, happily higher, feeling he had been taken out of himself and set free in a level of existence where nothing bad could ever happen. And that was only because of her. It was her power and influence upon his inner world. There was something uniquely astounding and miraculously magical in the simple yet totally conquering way she could do that by just being there with a caring, determined and preoccupied attitude.

Going back to his cell, he ignored the throbbing pain under the bandages. It was as if he didn't feel it: his heart was so light and his mind so far away. He stood there staring at the white walls, drifting in serene thoughts and just enjoying the afterglow of her presence in his head, the memory of her aura warming up in his chest with every breath.

The state of bliss lasted just one day: then he started longing for her, missing her and wishing he could get near her again.

In the following weeks he got to work in the kitchen. The guards were somehow suspicious of the chainsaw incident, so they let him work in a less dangerous environment. He got to peel potatoes and carrots for the soup, move the crates of bread or sacks of corn and flour. His days went by the same. The joy of having met her was definitely being replaced by darker visions and restrictions, prison bars and meaningless hours. He was already addicted to the

exhilarating feeling of ascending to a different reality around her, to that eternal moment in time when everything was bright and positively assuring, where life was beautiful and promising. Dreaming about the somehow frail but strong creature that had miraculously appeared in that stern, callous environment changed the chemicals in his brain instantly. Thomas felt a sense of unexplained happiness just by imagining he could meet Isabel again. And in one of those reverie moments, as he was chopping potatoes for the soup, he didn't watch where the knife was going and hit his fingers with the blade, cutting the flesh to the bone.

He didn't know what to feel for the first seconds: be confused that it had happened, be gladly thrilled at the idea of visiting the emergency unit where he could see his beloved doctor again, or be amazed that he suddenly had the opportunity to reach complete happiness through suffering that was totally insignificant and paled in the light of Isabel's fascinating aura.

He wrapped a kitchen towel around his fingers and went to the guards to request medical attention. The guards frowned and were not very quick to agree to take him to where he wanted to go.

“Is this serious? It doesn't look so bad.”

“I could get an infection. I must have it disinfected and bandaged”, he negotiated.

The guards reluctantly agreed and escorted him to the emergency room.

She was there, but a bit uneasy at the sight of him, for some reason avoiding to look in his direction, as if she had already guessed his amplified interest in her and it was something dangerous for that place and circumstance. She kept her composure anyway.

“You again”, she said calmly. “What happened now?”

“I had a kitchen incident.”

“Let me see.”

Isabel looked attentively at the wound.

“It's nothing to worry about”, she said casually, with the same reassuring certainty. “It's not as bad as the last time.”

She took care of his hand just the same, with equally preoccupied gestures. Thomas was sneaking glances at her, feeling like a hungry thief, trying to sink in his mind every detail about her, hoping he wouldn't skip anything from her amazing presence, to imprint his thoughts with everything she was, as if losing that chance would have meant missing out on the last and only precious opportunity to witness something astounding. It was also a chance to be saved, because in her absence he felt totally lost and life turned meaningless. Time with her was so short and yet so significant.

Thomas felt it was unfair that going in and out of the medical unit had to happen so fast each time. He wanted to stay a little longer with her... just one more minute... just a few more seconds... just a little forever more.

The guards didn't like to see him going too often to the

emergency room, so they decided to keep him confined to the cell. The boredom and the need to be near that beautiful amazing doctor named Isabel soon became unbearable for Thomas. He felt she was already a part of his soul, anchored so deep in his heart that he couldn't stand one day without her anymore. He felt he would go crazy and throw himself against the walls. He was beyond fascinated with her. He knew he had to see her again, no matter what.

As weeks went by, the idea of her being forbidden to him was driving him insane. He knew he had to do something: he asked for access to the computer room in the prison library. He browsed through the files of the institution, hacking some passwords to get in the officers accounts. He found pictures of her in the image gallery of history of the institution. It wasn't the same as meeting her in person, but the images carried some sort of healing power too, radiating through the screen, lifting him to a state of happiness, as if he had found a little hope in an ocean of desolation. He could see her eyes, contemplate her smile and dream there was hope to find her. Darkness dissipated from his mind as he was looking at her. He could believe, upon seeing her, that the world was a wonderful place as long as she was in it, despite the prison walls - those slowly disappeared around him.

However, that virtual happiness didn't last long either. It didn't take the computer engineer of the prison more than half an hour to find out someone had hacked into the system and was browsing

pictures with the officers. They tracked the source and busted him in the library, taking him immediately back to his cell. His access to the computer or the library was denied from that day on.

Thomas was desperate again, diving in the darkest thoughts that crowded his troubled mood. The obscurity was more a sense of perception of restlessness and confinement. He felt the space was stifling his mind. In her absence reality was desolate, reduced to limitations and emptiness. It clouded his heart with every passing day in the cell. He knew one thing for sure: he had to escape that room, or he would bang his head on the walls just to get out.

He figured out another way: since nobody wanted to deal with the bathrooms, he decided to ask to work with cleaning. They let him wash the corridors and toilets. As his cell buddies were mocking him for moping around with a bucket of dirty water, he had other plans in the back of his mind. He got his hands on a bottle of detergent and poured the content down his throat, gulping on the disgusting liquid with obstinacy. When he felt he couldn't stand the burning of the chemical anymore, he let the bottle roll on the floor and sat down, crouching in pain. His stomach was turning inside out and everything was spinning around him. The nauseating sensation had made him dizzy, overwhelming until he started throwing up. He could hear voices in the distance, as the prisoners were yelling from behind bars, but he could not get up. His stomach was trying to get rid of the poisonous chemical. He realized he had ingested much more than he

had estimated.

“What is this?” he heard somebody shout in his ear and a hand shook his shoulder. “Did you just do something stupid?”

He almost passed out, breathing heavily. He felt arms lifting him on a stretcher and an oxygen mask covered his nose and mouth. He ripped it away with one hand, to free himself to speak. He didn't know where they were taking him, but he had to ask one thing. Through the spinning walls around, the flickering of faces, the sound of steps and mumbling, he knew he wanted one thing for certain. That was the clearest thought in his mind, the most determined decision, at the same time it was an aching need so deep that it surpassed the dizziness and the half unconscious inert state of dissipating awareness.

“I must see doctor Isabel” he said loudly, demanding whoever was there.

He got no answer, so he repeated with the only power he had left, stubbornly and trying to speak as clearly as possible:

“I must see doctor Isabel. I must speak with her. I need to see doctor Isabel!”

Somebody talked to him from somewhere in the room:

“She will come when she finishes the surgery. One of the prisoners broke his skull in a fight.”

He understood she was in the operating room of the emergency unit. He knew he only had to wait: she would come. She would not let

him down. They said she would come. He tried to hang on to that assuring thought, but in the meantime the perfusions with sedatives sent him to oblivious sleep. Not knowing how many hours later, he opened his eyes. It seemed to him that she was there in the room, right in front of him, at the monitoring desk behind a computer, focused on the screen, with the medical uniform and the cap still on. Thomas was too feeble to speak and mostly unsure if the vision was a delirious dream or Isabel's real presence. He couldn't tell if she was really there, but he felt she must be - she had come to him. She must have come for real. He wished he could have gotten out of bed to walk to her, but he couldn't move. However, knowing she was there was so comforting that he relaxed and felt drowsiness overcloud his mind. He closed his eyes and fell asleep again, before he could find his voice to call her name. Many hours later, he woke up in the middle of the night. There was no one around him anymore. He was alone in the dark, nauseous, and started throwing up again, interminably, as his stomach was wriggling inside, defending itself against the chemicals running through his veins.

He didn't see her the following days. The tall inquisitive doctor came instead to check on him, while he was recovering. Her absence was frustrating and Thomas saw it as a punishment: they wouldn't let him see her because they already knew his fixation had become too addictive and obsessive, in their view. They also considered him emotionally unstable, with dangerous self destructive thoughts. Yet he

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