

**LOVERS UNDERCOVER
LÖVERS ÜNTERCÖVER**



by CHRYS ROMEO



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LOVERS UNDERCOVER

by Chrys Romeo

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1.

Going Deep Undercover

Love can exist under any circumstances: time, place, whatever... it can happen. It can change a lifetime with its presence, with its light. Here's a story that happened in my life and convinced me of the truth that love is more powerful than anything... and it can exist anyway, anyhow.

When we got closer to the place where we had been sent someone shouted “ambush!” and we had to spread out and run. Bullets started raining above us from somewhere nobody could see. I threw myself on the ground, covering my eyes, as if that could have protected me from the bullets. After a while, the sound stopped. I looked up: the whole group had scattered on the field that was interspersed with steep trenches and valleys. I got up and walked aimlessly a few steps, when a field mine blew right next to me, throwing me over the edge of a pit and covering me with loads of dusty soil. I almost fell over in the large trench below. It was the edge of a crevasse in the ground, made by an earthquake or previous explosions. I stood up, trying to step away from the slippery ground under my feet and I scattered the dirt from my head, adjusting the metal helmet. Suddenly, I heard a voice from below:

“Hey, who's there?”

Looking down, I noticed a girl. A soldier too. It wasn't a surprise that war also recruited girls – but it was astonishing to see her there, in the ditch. Her long hair the color of sand flowed on her shoulders, from underneath the helmet. Her greenish eyes were strangely and brightly staring at me.

“You covered me in dust” she said jokingly and smiled, scattering it off her uniform.

“How did you get there?” I asked her curiously.

“Probably the same way you almost did”, she answered and kept smiling.

That seemed funny and I laughed. She laughed too, then said:

“Will you help me climb out?”

“Sure”, I said and I extended a hand.

Her long fingers, the color of pale moonlight got my attention. When she stood next to me, I realized she was probably the same height and age as I was. We were both barely eighteen, not ready for war and not ready to be exposed to imminent danger, but we were laughing at it with that unconscious defiance that young people have, with unexplained certainty that we were somehow invincible and unaffected by whatever went on around us.

“Thanks!”

She sat down and started scratching off the mud from her boots. I wanted to get out of the trench, but a bullet sizzled by my ear, so I crouched back in the ditch. I sat next to her, as she kept clearing her boots off with a stick.

“What unit are you from?” I asked her.

“Twenty. What about you?”

“Twenty one.”

She looked at me attentively. Her eyes so full of light astounded me.

The sounds of guns were still firing above.

“We might have to crawl our way out of here”, I said.

“Hmm... it doesn't matter, we're both done for”, she replied a bit displeased. “Let's go!”

We jumped from the ditch at the same time, crawling and rolling quickly under the flying bullets until we reached the forest. Then we ran to find our comrades among

the trees.

I watched her get out of sight and I was a bit sorry that I hadn't asked her name. *"Anyway, we might not see each other again, so..."* I thought to myself.

My comrades were already gathered in line. The commanding officer saw me integrate among them and questioned me severely:

"You! where have you been?"

"There was an explosion nearby and I fell in a ditch and..."

"Take your hands out of your pockets and don't wander off from the group again! Understood?"

"Yes."

Irritated that I hadn't said "Yes sir", the officer turned his back on me and ordered us to go uphill, to the top of the deep forest.

In the evening we arrived at the barracks that represented our quarters in that mountain. It had been a long tiresome way, so when we got there I was both hungry and sleepy, so I rolled in bed immediately. Early in the morning the deafening siren woke me up. I went to the bathroom, to find only ice cold water running in the taps, so I washed my face and got out in the yard. Everyone was already in line again. The commander frowned at me. The morning light was suddenly sharp and blinding.

"You're always separated from the group, soldier! Didn't you hear the siren?"

"I did."

"Then why didn't you move faster and get here in time for morning checkout?"

"I went to the bathroom."

The lines started laughing, their voices rising in the clear morning air.

"Silence!" roared the officer. "You go to your place now and don't make this happen again, you hear me?"

"Yes."

"Yes, what?"

“Yes, sir!”

“When a superior officer is speaking to you, you must stand up straight. Didn't you know that?”

“Yes sir, I knew that.”

“Then why didn't you?”

“I couldn't remember.”

“What do you mean, you couldn't remember?”

“If you're yelling at me I can't remember everything I must, sir.”

The commander stared at me, trying to see if I was making fun of the situation or really meant what I said. He couldn't decide, so he shouted at us to go have breakfast:

“To the dining hall, soldiers! Move!”

The canteen was suddenly filled with noise, chatter and clinking dishes. I ate in silence, alone at my table. I didn't know anyone well enough: there hadn't been time for it. We had been gathered and rushed up the mountain to strengthen the defensive posts, before we could even glance at each other.

Then I heard more noise flooding from the doors of the canteen: a new group was coming in for breakfast.

“Unit twenty”, someone said next to me and I looked up curiously.

They were mostly girls. The guys in the canteen whistled cheerfully, welcoming the pretty soldiers who seemed to expect that and not pay much attention to the atmosphere. They were hungry and only cared about the food at that moment, which they quickly placed on their trays. The commander announced that the new unit would be mixed up with ours, so we had to make room for them in the barracks.

I had just finished breakfast and I stood watching the girls unpacking in the yard. Suddenly, I saw the one I had met a day before, in the ditch. She was struggling with a backpack. I approached her.

“Hi. How are you? Can I help you?”

She looked at me and didn't seem surprised. She allowed me to help, agreeing to it somewhat tired:

“If you want to, you can take this backpack; it's a bit heavy.”

I picked it up.

“Which are the barracks we're staying?” she asked, looking around mostly bored and detached, as if she had seen enough and had had enough of it already.

“Over here. Those are the officers quarters. We're staying on this other side. Why did you get here so late? We arrived yesterday. Weren't you supposed to be here at the same time?”

My questions made her answer simply:

“I don't know. Our guide probably took a detour. It was a long way up the forest. Actually, it was quite a miserable track”, she said with disgust.

I opened the door to the barrack.

“You can choose your place, there are enough available. We've got bunker beds.”

“Where are you staying?” she asked me somehow disoriented and undecided.

“I'm over here, the top. The one below is free.”

“Perfect. I prefer the one below. I'll stay here, if you don't mind.”

She seemed to feel safe next to me, so she placed her backpack on the bed and sat on the edge, looking around in desolation. Then she suddenly remembered something and glanced up cheerfully:

“Let's introduce each other. We've met, but I don't know your name.”

“It's Ky.”

She looked at me attentively and her eyes glistened with a deep light.

“Ky”, she smiled as she said my name. “It suits you. My name is Seloren.”

I shook her hand again – the same pale moonlight hand with slim fingers.

“Nice to meet you, Seloren.”

Her name was just as delicate and refined as her hands. I was amazed by the

unusual girl that somehow had landed in the same forest, on the same mountain, in the same barrack with me.

She seemed tired and she took off her boots, stretching on the rough blanket.

The wooden barrack was empty. Everyone was still at the canteen.

“You didn't eat much” I noticed. “Don't you want breakfast? I could bring it for you.”

“That's nice, but I don't like the food they give us. I must be careful what I eat. I have some sandwiches in this backpack.”

“I'll let you rest now”.

I got out, as the soldiers were gathering for the instructions in the yard. We had to make a schedule for patrolling the forest and I didn't want to end up in the night shift, though it kind of happened anyway. As I was crossing the yard, the commander saw me.

“You! Are you wasting time wandering around? Don't you have anything better to do, soldier?”

“I was going to check the schedule.”

“I'll simplify the schedule for you: go to the canteen and help wash the dishes! Are you there yet? Move!”

I had to go to the kitchen, so the schedule was decided in my absence... and I got the night shift, of course.

At night the forest was full of lurking shadows, cracking branches, screeching owls, unexpected shuffling of leaves and we being startled at the slightest sound. We put our night vision goggles, so we at least thought we were safer somehow even though it was still unnerving, to stare into the darkness and walk on our toes.

Close to dawn I came back and climbed in bed. Everyone was asleep. Seloren was asleep too.

However, in the morning when the alarm went off, just a couple of hours after I had thrown myself in bed, I looked around and I didn't see anyone: they had already

exited to the yard. I was still so sleepy that I put the blanket back on my head.

Then I heard a voice next to me:

“Ky, wake up. The alarm already went off.”

”I know, I heard it”, I said from under the blanket.

“So come on, get up!” she insisted. “It's been five minutes since the alarm.”

I took off the blanket and looked around.

“Get up Ky”, Seloren spoke again.

She was closing her backpack, putting a towel in.

I mumbled from my bed:

“I don't feel like going to the morning checkup. I've been on patrol last night and I'm sleepy. You go and tell them I'm asleep.”

“You'll be in trouble. The commander will be furious.” she warned me.

I yawned. She came next to my head.

“You really aren't coming out?”

“Nope. I want to sleep.”

“And I'm telling you the commander will be furious.”

“So what. Let him.”

“ As you wish,” she said and went out.

She returned in less than ten seconds.

“The commander said you should come outside right now.”

I realized I had to get out of bed and face the situation again.

I went outside. The commander was waiting in the yard, with everyone in line, staring at me. The yard was too silent, with too many eyes.

“Why didn't you come out when you heard the alarm, soldier?”

“I was sleepy.”

“Is that how you talk to an officer?”

“No, sir.”

“I didn't hear you!”

“No sir!” I shouted.

“No sir what?”

“No sir that's not how I talk to an officer, sir!”

The commander scrutinized me again, squinting his eyes to see if I was doing it on purpose.

I expected the worst to happen: thunder or lightning to strike me down. In the silence of the yard, the commander spoke word by word:

“I'll give you a chance: we're about to have shooting exercises this morning. You'll shoot first. If you don't hit the target in the middle – if you don't shoot a perfect shot, you'll serve in the canteen, wash the dishes then stay on patrol the whole night! Let's go.”

I went to the shooting field at the back of the quarters. They had lined up cardboard targets, white shapes with black circles and the middle point that I had to hit by all means.

I was given the rifle and I stretched down in the grass, aiming attentively. I could feel the eyes of my comrades and also Seloren watching me curiously. My hands were not steady. I was tired after the night shift. My eyes saw the target through a veil of fog. I pulled the trigger and I heard the roar of the bullet. It hit the cardboard, but not exactly in the middle.

The commander ordered immediately:

“There you go: to the canteen! And tonight I'll check how well you guard the gate and the premises!”

I stood up. I didn't know how I got the courage to speak. Maybe Seloren watching me gave me the audacity to surpass the borders of what I would usually do.

“That's not fair, sir.” I spoke firmly. “I was up last night too. I won't be much use if I don't get a few hours of sleep.”

That tipped the odds against me: having the nerve to contradict the orders.

The commander became furious, just as Seloren had warned me.

“One day of underground lockup for you! Take him away!”

Two soldiers grabbed me by the arms and dragged me to the cellar that was meant for prisoners. First they hit me a few times, because I didn't want to get inside, then threw a bucket of cold water on my head. And then I was left in the dark, to tremble the entire evening and the whole night. I was sitting down, crouched with my head on my knees, feeling the water still dripping on my back, the shirt sticking to the cold skin. I thought the hours were endless.

However, not after long, something unexpected happened: when the barracks were silent and I could only hear the owls screeching far away in the forest, everyone sound asleep, the door cracked open and someone slipped in.

“Are you here?” I heard an anxious voice.

It was her.

I looked up in the dark.

“I'm here”, I said.

“Then why didn't you say anything?”

“I just did.”

She came closer and her bright eyes glistened in the night towards me. She kneeled next to me, touching my cold hands.

“What did they do to you?”

I shrugged carelessly.

“They threw water on my head.”

“What's up with your hands?”

“What's up with them?”

“They're freezing”, she said, bewildered that I couldn't figure it out.

“So what?” I said in a matter of fact tone.

She looked at me curiously and then started smiling amused.

I asked her a more serious question:

“Have you come to set me free?”

“No”, she answered.

“Then why did you come? And how did you get the door open?”

“Actually, I brought you a blanket”, she remembered and unfolded it over my shoulders. “Here, to keep you warm. I had to bribe the guy at the door with a pack of cigarettes”, she smiled.

“You're slick”, I smiled too.

“Yeah,” she admitted and her eyes glimmered in front of me.

“Thank you for the blanket.”

“Don't thank me. It's the blanket from your bed. You'd better not lose it, or we'll both be in trouble. I couldn't let you freeze in here the whole night”, she added. “It's cold in here, isn't it?”

“Isn't it obvious?”

“Yes, it is.”

Then she suddenly laughed:

“You were great! I can't believe you confronted the commander that way. But why didn't you shoot right? I kept my fingers crossed for you!”

“You did?”

She stared at me sideways, her features more serious in the dark.

“Yes, I did.”

“Well, it seems it didn't work”, I grinned. “I'm in here now.”

She smiled again. Then she said:

“Tell me something.”

“What?”

“Did you do that on purpose? Get yourself in trouble, I mean.”

“Do you think I like being in here?”

“I've been watching you yesterday and I think you have a talent for setting people off.”

We both laughed.

Outside the guard moved and banged on the door.

She stood up.

“I must go. Good night.”

“Good night. And thanks”, I added as I watched her disappear.

The blanket made the night warmer. In the morning, when the door cracked open, I stepped outside to find the commander enraged again. He grabbed the blanket, taking it off my shoulders.

“What's this ? Where did you get it? Who brought this to you?”

I was blinded by the morning sun and the mountain fresh air, so I didn't feel like speaking right away. And I wasn't going to tell him. The commander turned to the guard who confessed, so Seloren was called to stand by my side.

“You're going to be on guard by the gate, both of you, for twenty four hours straight! Let that be a lesson for others who don't take orders as they are instructed!”

So it was decided: we had to stand and guard the gate together, Seloren and I.

I couldn't help but see it as a fortunate opportunity to spend more time with her. I enjoyed her company in a way I couldn't explain.

She wasn't very happy about it though: the idea of standing there until the next day didn't enchant her.

At first we remained by the gate, listening to the shouts in the distance, where the soldiers were exercising. We just stood there in silence, watching the mountain tops high above the forest: the steep rocks and the snowy ridges.

The sky was getting cloudy and soon it started to rain. Seloren retreated under the small roof of the gate booth, leaning the gun against the wall and holding the uniform

around her, to keep warm. I remained there in the rain, water dripping down my steel helmet. I liked the sound of the raindrops against the metal: the clinking sound was cozy and soothing.

“Ky, do you want to get a cold?”, I heard her ask me a bit upset from the booth.

“Yes”, I replied and I smiled, closing my eyes and letting the rain fall on my face.

“Get some shelter over here. I feel a chill only by seeing you standing in the rain like that.”

“Don't you like the rain?”

“No.”

She looked around to the silent forest with the pines fluttering their needles and the fir trees whispering mysteriously. The rain made the forest seem more peaceful. Mist was floating above the trees, coming down from the mountain tops. It also brought a humid chilling air.

“I think you haven't had enough freezing last night”, she said a bit ironically.

I smiled at her.

“No, I hadn't.”

“That means I struggled in vain to bring you the blanket, right?”

Her smile intensified.

“Well, it wasn't entirely in vain.”

“Can you explain to me the use of it?”

“You only had the illusion of doing a good deed for a helpless soldier. As for me, I benefited in a different way: look how you're keeping me company as a result. I would have been bored otherwise, guarding the gate by myself. Instead, now we can talk.”

And I grinned. She stared at me for a while, then she looked away. I didn't know whether she was glad or not to have me there. I waited to see if she chose silence or conversation with me.

In the yard, the commander was shouting again, his voice getting distant behind

the barracks.

Then Seloren looked in my direction, asking casually:

“So, what would you like to talk about?”

I was thrilled she decided in favor of conversation. I thought about it for a second.

“Tell me about yourself.”

“What would you like to know?”

“What's a girl like you doing in the army?”

“What do you mean, a girl like me? Like how?”

“You seem fragile.”

“I'm not that fragile.”

“You seem scared.”

“I'm not that scared. However, coming here wasn't my choice. I was recruited for my medical training. I was in med school when the war started.”

She stared at me through the rain drops, her eyes a bit shady.

“What about you? What are you doing in the army?”

“My specialty is gun powder, bombs, mines, artillery... stuff like that. I'm usually the one who cuts the wire before everything blows up.”

She smiled amused.

“Did you ever cut the wrong wire?”

“Would I be here if I did?”

She laughed.

“It wouldn't surprise me, the way you're going about things. So what else do you want to discuss?” she inquired.

I glanced at her slim figure trembling in the humid chilling air.

“Have you ever been in love?”

She shrugged. The question didn't startle or upset her.

“Yes, for a day. I danced with him at a party, but I didn't see him the same way

after that. It didn't last.”

I wondered why she had liked that boy - and if it could have been me instead, would it have lasted longer?

I didn't say anything though.

“What about you?” she asked me directly.

“What?”

“Have you ever been in love?”

“No”, I said but it wasn't true.

However, I didn't want to tell her about the girls that I had taken an interest in before her. It didn't matter anyway. The war had robbed us of the perspective of dating or having fun. It was a luxury we no longer afforded. We had to stay alive: that was the main priority.

“What do you think about this war?” I asked her after a while.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, do you think it has a purpose?”

And I stared into the distance, at the mountain tops, as if to get a better perspective from the view. The mountains made me philosophical, as if something metaphysical was in the distance. She seemed to think about it, pondering on the answer.

“It might not have a precise purpose, but it's probably necessary to get over it.”

“How is it necessary if it doesn't have a purpose?”

She smiled.

“Like all things without a purpose, it's necessary to end. Maybe the fight in itself is necessary. We must defend something.”

“What would you have done if we had met as enemies in the battle?” I suddenly asked her.

She replied calmly, with the same undisturbed smile:

“I would have shot you.”

I didn't know if she meant it as a joke or as the truth. But I didn't care. I put the gun down and I started jumping around in the rain, throwing my hands up in the air:

“Come on! Shoot me now!”

She shook her head amused, staring at me with her intense eyes shining brighter.

“You're totally nuts! “

It started to get cold, but I felt like playing. The moment had heated my mood. I stepped up to her with my fists closed.

“Guess which one has a hidden treasure.”

She played along. I knew she didn't have anything better to do anyway, but there was an attitude of complicity that I could already see about her. She was actually captured by my game.

“This one.”

“Here, you won!”

And I opened the fist, showing her a piece of grass.

She just smiled, not getting the point of it, but it didn't matter very much.

“And do you know what I've got in the other fist?” I continued.

“No.What?”

“It's the purpose of war. The meaning of it. Look!”

And I opened the fist willingly. The palm of my hand was empty. She looked at me as if to say again “*you're nuts*”, but she just laughed.

And then she said:

“I've got a riddle for you too. If you guess right, I'll tell you where you can find a book of poems. Now it's your turn.”

She extended her fists. I chose one of them. When she opened it, I found a small pebble.

I was thrilled.

“Yay, I win! Ok, so tell me. Where is the book?”

She looked at me pretending to be sorry for me, as if a difficult task was ahead and I wasn't aware of it. She showed me the group of trees down the path, below the gate.

“The fifth tree has a book of poems buried at its roots. Go and bring it to me, please.”

I was happy to run down the path. I counted the trees: one, two, three, four, five. Then I took out my army knife and I kneeled on the ground, where I started digging. Even if I knew it was just a game, I really believed at that moment that I would find a miraculous book hidden there. Suddenly, I heard a voice shouting at me from the gate:

“Hey soldier! What are you doing?”

I looked over my shoulder and saw the commander who had come to the gate and was staring at me, next to Seloren who was smiling subtly in complicity, signaling me discreetly to come back. I stood up and returned to the post. The magic was gone. The commander glared at me.

“Why did you leave your post, soldier? What were you doing there?”

“I buried a dead rat”, I said instantly, without thinking too much and Seloren looked at me with that admiring light again in her eyes, that I liked most.

The commander frowned.

“A dead rat?”

“Yes sir, it was here and it smelled badly. I had to bury it. I couldn't leave it around any minute longer.”

“Very well, but don't leave your post again for anything! No matter what, do you understand?”

“Yes, sir.”

I grabbed my gun from the ground and stood firm by the gate.

The commander left.

We started to laugh.

“Was it you who called him?” I asked her.

“No way! He startled me too. I didn't have time to warn you. I guess he was checking on us, to see what we're up to. He said you're weird.”

“Really?”

“Yes. That's what he said.”

“And you? What do you think?”

She smiled.

“I think you're out of your mind.”

The way she said it sounded like a compliment. I took it as a good thing: it was better to be out of my mind instead of boring.

We spent the rest of the day playing cards, talking and sipping tea that we got from the canteen in exchange for Seloren's cigarettes. In the evening we were already feeling great about the whole thing and it was as if we'd been together for years, not hours. Something magnetic and fascinating had bonded us into a magical interaction. It felt right to be there together. Time went by so fast, we didn't even notice it was getting dark. Blue shadows extended from the trees and the moon appeared through the clouds, above the mountains. Seloren was trembling.

“Do you want my jacket?” I offered.

“Thanks, but it's getting too cold. I'm calling someone to bring us our blankets”, she said.

“Anymore cigarettes to trade?” I joked.

“Don't mention it: I ran out of them.”

I came up with an idea. I had a small portable music player. I set it on a slow song, with the volume just enough for us to hear without waking up the whole camp. I put it down by the gate and got up. I extended a hand to her.

“Come on. Let's dance.”

She was surprised, but smiled. For a moment, she just looked at me with sparkling eyes. Then she got up and came closer. Her arms went around my shoulders. I held her

waist and started to move slowly. We stared in each other eyes, feeling something thrilling between us and around, as we were dancing by the gate, guns set aside. Our movements matched instinctively, naturally, like breathing together. We couldn't take our eyes off each other. It was like a spell.

We didn't talk the whole time we danced, but simply smiled, lost in that locked stare that spoke more than anything. It seemed so captivating. It was like flowing with music. When the song ended, we reluctantly separated, but I could feel the warmth had risen to our heads.

“This dance made me feel better”, she said. “Do you know that song that played?” she asked me.

I knew the answer.

“It's *One more try.*”

She smiled, saying as if to herself:

“It seems I can't catch you off guard. This song's one of my favourites...”

“Mine too.”

When we put our blankets around us, the barracks were turning silent. Everyone was asleep.

I let the music go on slowly, next to us.

I kept staring into the darkness. At night the forest was unpredictable and menacing. Every bush, every tree shadow could have hidden the danger of an attack; the barrel of a machine gun; the eyes of an enemy; the doom of imminent battle. Nevertheless, I wasn't startled or worried anymore. Being there with Seloren made the evening enchanted, and I felt fortunate to have that. Nothing else was on my mind, except the night ahead.

“Let's climb up on the roof of the booth”, I told her and she agreed.

We had a better view from the roof and it certainly felt like an advantage, to watch the valley from above. The moon was getting in and out of the veil of clouds. We stood

there with the rifles beside us, staring at the mountains. I wondered what she was thinking. I could see her profile in the pale blue light, breathing silently.

“It's beautiful up here” she said.

“It is”, I said and glanced at her.

My heart was beating faster.

“You know,” she said without looking at me, “they say that you get more appetite if you start eating.”

“What do you mean?”

“I'll let you continue that”, she said simply and turned her eyes to mine.

She was serious. I kind of guessed what she implied, but I didn't dare make a move. It was so tempting though... I reached out a hand and caressed her face. She smiled at me with a pleading light in her eyes, surrendering to my touch. I stroked her face and her hair for a moment. Her eyes filled with that overwhelming light, waiting.

And then she just asked me:

“Why don't you kiss me?”

The question was unexpected. I was surprised, but captivated.

“I don't know why”, I answered because I really didn't know what was keeping me from it.

“Do you want me to do it?”

“Yeah.”

She leaned towards me but the rifle got in the way. She laughed.

“Let's switch places.”

I put the rifle on the edge and then she leaned above me and we kissed for a moment that seemed like an eternity wrapped in a second.

Kissing her was different from what I would usually imagine: it took me to another height, to another reality and a miraculous sensation.

When she looked in my eyes again we already belonged to each other.

“Now we have a secret”, she smiled at me.

“We do.”

“You're mine”, she said in a way amused, yet halfway meaning it in a more serious manner.

I smiled.

“I'm yours, if the army doesn't take me away from you tomorrow morning.”

I noticed she still shivered under the blanket.

“Listen, let's put both blankets above us”, I proposed.

We stood together under the two blankets and it got so nice and cozy that we fell asleep a few times. I kept waking up, trying to remain awake to protect her, but I fell asleep next to her, time and time again. Even if the valley at our feet could have exposed us to unexpected trouble and danger, that sleep was the safest and most serene we'd ever experienced.

In the middle of the night it started to rain and I got down to look for something of waterproof material to cover us. I crossed the yard and walked to the canteen. Everything was silent and dark. I stopped in the kitchen, looking out the window at the water running down the glass, listening to the dripping sound. I was contemplating the rain when I heard soft steps behind me. I turned and I saw Seloren there, standing in the dark beside me.

“I should have known I'd find you in the kitchen when it's raining”, she whispered. “Come, let's go back to sleep”, she said and took my hand.

I picked some plastic covers and we returned to cuddle by the gate. I couldn't fall asleep immediately, as she was looking in my eyes, her stare glimmering in the dark. She was smiling endlessly. We just looked in each other's eyes, mesmerized, holding hands until we fell asleep. When I woke up she was still sleeping, so beautiful and unaware, with her head blissfully resting on my shoulder. I moved swiftly. I knew we had to return to our posts. It wouldn't have been a good outcome if anyone saw us sleeping instead of

guarding the gate.

She was so deeply asleep that she didn't sense I was standing up. I leaned back and I kissed her on the cheek and then she opened her eyes slowly, yawning.

“Wake up”, I whispered. “It's time to get up.”

She looked around as if through foggy lenses.

“Is it morning already?”

“Yes, it is. We must get to our posts.”

It felt like the most intimate thing, to have shared that peaceful sleep under those blankets with her, in total surrender. It was so enticing that neither of us wanted it to end, but we had to return to reality, or we'd be toast.

“Alright”, she said standing up. “You'll have to help me climb down from this”, she smiled a bit amused.

We returned to the gate. The barracks were waking up. The noise from the canteen was rising above the forest. A truck was brought to the front of the yard. And then there was an announcement from the officer in command.

“Some of you will have to move closer to the front line, which is higher up the mountain. The enemies are pushing the battle this way. We must stop it before it reaches the towns in the valleys. We're here for this purpose. There's a list and the ones who find themselves on it must get in the truck and be transferred to the next defense point. Here it is!”

He pinned a sheet of paper on the fence, next to the truck.

Soldiers came to it, reading the names to discover if they had been chosen to go: some left cursing and frowning, some were relieved to not find themselves there.

“I guess we should check it out too”, I said, looking over the gate to the fuss and noise around the truck.

Seloren didn't seem to care either way.

“You go and look for me too. I'll wait here.”

I went to the list, a bit worried. I didn't want our story to end. I didn't want either of us to leave. But I had to read the names. The ground sank under my feet when I saw her name written there. I read it a few times, just to make sure: there was no mistake about it. She had been selected for the front line. It seemed so unfair, to suddenly find her, to discover so much happiness with her and yet our time to be so short together. And I didn't know how I would find the words to tell her the news. I returned to her, dragging my feet slowly.

When she saw me come, she remained indifferently calm, but she looked away to the mountains.

I stood there next to her, swallowing my words.

"I'm on the list, right?" she said, without looking at me.

I couldn't lie to her.

"Yes. Your name is there."

She shrugged and turned to look at the truck.

"Well, I might as well go and get ready."

I watched anxiously as the truck was being loaded with soldiers. I watched painfully how Seloren brought her backpack and threw it in the truck, getting ready to join the selected group. She turned around to look at me. The sadness in her eyes almost brought tears to mine. I couldn't speak. I tried to smile at her and somehow she smiled too.

"You should see your face", she spoke suddenly more detached, as if she wasn't really leaving.

My sorrow had taken hers away.

"I'll find you when the war is over", I promised her.

"We'll see each other again, I'm sure."

She jumped in the truck that had already started its engine. She only leaned down briefly to get a kiss from me.

I watched helplessly how the truck set its wheels in motion, going past the gate and starting up on the forest trail among the trees, getting more distant with each moment, almost lost out of sight. And then I suddenly reacted to the impulse in my heart: I started running after it. When I got closer she extended her hand and helped me jump inside, smiling again with that admiring light in her eyes:

“You're totally nuts!”

The barracks remained behind us.

I sat there next to her in the truck, as the other soldiers were staring at us. Some of them were more preoccupied and worried about their fate ahead, others were just glancing curiously, but it didn't matter to me. I was relieved to be by her side: I couldn't care less where the truck was going. We held hands like happy children.

“Now what?” she asked me.

“I'm coming with you.”

“You're serious.”

“Absolutely.”

“I should have expected that from you”, she added, laughing. “You should have seen yourself running after the truck. That was something else!”

I laughed too.

“I ran fast, didn't I?”

“You did, Ky. “

Lovers Defying War

I often thought, looking back, that our story could have very well ended right there: when I ran after the truck and joined her on the way to the front line. If I hadn't done that, it would have remained just a simple memory of passing each other by. I sometimes wondered, during the many years of her being lost to me in the world, what if our story hadn't started in that forest when we hardly knew who we were and what we were doing with our lives? I wondered if I could have been the same person, had I not met her then. I had been uncertain of many things about myself until I encountered her. She had brought that absolute and undeniable liberation to me - to be exactly who I was. It happened in the same way a man who's condemned to be hanged is saved by a girl who agrees to love him. She saved me from the mist of not knowing for sure if I might be accepted as myself, or what I deserved in life, as far as love was implied - and how I would confront the world and its wars to affirm or defend it. She cleared that from me forever, in the same way the clouds lifted off the mountains and drifted from the clear blue sky, dissipating into eternity. Her love had seen and lifted my soul with undeniable certainty. I ascended to a level of confidence that there was so much more to life than I'd imagined. Everything was possible, any miracle could happen, each day was a gift. There was no way back after loving her: I was free to be myself in a new discovered existence and nobody could take that away, ever again.

Before I met her I didn't care if the war hit me with a bullet. The moment I found myself running out of breath to be with her, that decisive moment defined the rest of our story and my involvement in the war of life. As I was sitting in the truck, happily holding her hand, not caring about anything else that was going on, I knew we had

started on a new path ahead of us and we were inseparable, no matter what. Life and the war would contradict me many times after that day, but I was still right about it, beyond everything. There was a meaning to us being together that surpassed the war that was going on. An everlasting universe of infinite light appeared between us, overwhelming in intensity, anytime we looked at each other. It was something so right that kept the battle far away, even if we were in the middle of it.

When we arrived at our destination we were already tired and sleepy.

The camp was high on a plateau, surrounded by tall trees, but it was much colder than the forest below and there was also snow everywhere. We jumped down from the truck and then just stood there, holding hands, looking around. We didn't know what was going to happen, what was ahead of us or what unknown danger could have tumbled down from the rocks and mountain tops that seemed much bigger and closer to where we were. I held her hand and felt her fingers tighten the grip around mine. We were together and that was what mattered most.

“Get inside the tents! You'll receive white camouflage uniforms, because from now on we're hiding in the snow”, the officer announced.

The camp was made of big white camouflage tents that barely kept out the cold air. We got our new uniforms and went to find shelter inside. We chose two bunker beds, just as we did at the barracks: mine at the top, hers sheltered under it. We didn't talk very much, as we were sipping the soup from the cans that were distributed around.

And then I asked her, as I was staring down into the bowl of soup:

“Did you mean what you said, at the gate?”

She looked confused.

“What exactly, from what I said?”

I smiled. I needed to light up the atmosphere.

“About the book of poems. Was there really a book of poems under the tree?”

She suddenly smiled and her eyes brightened instantly.

“Now you'll never know, will you”, she said playfully, with teasing irony.

“I'll go back and check it out tonight.”

“Don't you dare.”

I finished my soup and put down the bowl, then I stood up, looking determined.

“I'm going right now.”

She glanced at me a bit alarmed and grabbed my sleeve.

“Ky, sit down! I'm serious!”

“I want that book.”

“You're nuts, they won't let you!”

Then she saw my smile and shook her head, letting go of my sleeve and running her hand through her hair, with a deep breath of relief.

“I almost believed you! You scared me.”

I sat down next to her, still amused.

“Don't worry, I'm not going... not right now anyway.”

“It's not funny”, she added.

“I guess I'll have to write that book myself and give it to you one day.”

“I'm sure one day you will.”

She looked in my eyes and smiled again. And there was a deep confidence in the light of her stare, something so absolutely certain, as if she believed in me and my words beyond anything. I was amazed at that confidence and stood there mesmerized, immersed in that moment that took us to a higher realm, above the war, above everything. Years later I would remember that light in her eyes and yearn for its unspoken miraculous truth.

Outside, the sound of running boots on the frozen rocks became a rush of shouts and hasty noises, metal and wood, crates and screeching equipment in the snow. Someone came in the tent, rushing us out:

“Let's go! We've got a mission to do right away!”

In front of the tents there was a group planning to go up the snowy ridges.

“The enemy intercepted our transmissions and sabotaged the convoy of supplies down the mountain. We need to blow up their radars.”

I was chosen to go, since it was my specialty to install or defuse explosive devices.

Seloren remained by the tents. She was asked to help prepare the first aid tent for the wounded, in case there would be any.

I grabbed my tools and left with the mission group, climbing the steep snowy rocks. It was almost sunset and the snow reflected the colors of the horizon, pale shades covering the silent ridges, huge teeth of stone rising to the sky. Over the edge we saw a high antenna, surrounded by a barbed wire fence.

“Get down” the officer whispered.

We lay in the snow, feeling to cold get to our bones.

“Move slowly. We must cut through the fence and blow up that junk.”

That junk was actually a steel tower. It didn't seem to be guarded, or so we thought.

We started crawling towards it when the first bullets flew through the air. The sound of scattered snow was worse than the gunshot. You could never know where the next hit would be.

“Get back! They've got a sniper up in the cliffs!”

We rolled quickly over the edge. A few more bullets hit someone in the leg. The sound of broken bones was followed by his screams. We grabbed the soldier and dragged him back to camp, leaving a trail of bright red spots in the snow. Someone had to stay behind to cover up the tracks.

“We'll try again after it gets dark”, the officer said frowning and we were left waiting for the night hours.

When we returned, the camp was under alarm, from hearing the shooting guns. We took the soldier to infirmary. Seloren was there, waiting to deal with the situation. I

only saw her for a moment and we exchanged glances. She was a bit worried, but didn't say anything aside from "Be careful". I didn't want to add to her worries, so I just let her do her job, as she got busy immediately.

At night the mission was on again. We went back to the radar up in the cliffs. When we got to the edge of the mountain ridge we paused. I didn't expect it to be entirely my responsibility, but I was chosen again to take action.

"You go alone from here", the officer told me. "We'll cover you in case they notice. We've got the machine guns ready."

I rolled in the snow, down to the valley. The sense of danger was making my ears pick up the slightest noises. I wished there could have been owls instead of that swishing sound of the snow. Darkness could have hidden one sniper or ten of them as well. I tried not to imagine the guns pointed in my direction. My heart was racing in my temples. The snow was completely dark: not blue and not even shady. The moon remained behind clouds. I had a sense I was being watched. I stopped and listened. I was sure I could hear the finger on the trigger behind the cliffs. Then the bullet came through the air, flying by my head. I put my face in the snow and my hands above me. I stood still for a few seconds: I knew if the sniper had night vision, I wouldn't stand a chance. The valley would expose me, had I moved. Breathing in snow for a few minutes, I decided there was no way back: I could only advance. So I started crawling slowly. The bullet had been random. I was almost sure it had been fired without night vision. Then a second bullet hit the snow near me. I rolled over quickly: only a few meters to the fence. Another bullet missed me and I was by the wire, cutting it fast. My hands were trembling a little. I was afraid I'd never see Seloren again. I crawled under the fence, running to the steel antenna. I took off my backpack with the detonation devices and placed them in the snow. My position was inconvenient for the sniper. I realized they had been shooting from only one angle. I was suddenly angry at the war itself. "Politicians start wars and lovers have to end it" I thought bitterly, as I was connecting the wires. I didn't want to

miss my chance of being alive to enjoy the love I'd just found, only because of some irreversible feature of human race that needed constant confrontation and conflict. "We should be better than that, but we never were, in our entire history", I thought and clicked on the countdown detonation switch.

I had to get out of there faster than I had come.

As I rolled in the snow, the bullets started flying by again.

"Come on, hurry up!" the others shouted from beyond the ridge.

Then the explosion flared in the night and deafened our ears. The steel tower leaned and fell over in the snow, among flying debris and flames. We didn't have time to stay there and enjoy the victory. Bullets were roaring from everywhere. There was no point firing back in the dark, at unseen enemies. We headed back to the trail.

I didn't even feel the burn on my right temple. I was so determined to stay alive, I hardly noticed I had been hit. It was only when I got to the camp that I saw the blood dripping by my ear. I was sent to infirmary and as I entered the tent I smiled at her, relieved to see her eyes again. I was so glad to be alive, by her side.

She was instantly preoccupied.

"Sit down here, please."

"It's nothing. It's just a scratch", I said simply.

"Yeah right, if you say so. Sit still."

She wrapped my head in a bandage, with delicate and careful gestures.

"The crazy brave soldier", she smiled in the end, grabbing my collar in her hands and staring in my eyes.

"I'm not brave" I said. "I'm just lucky to be here."

"Shut up..."

She leaned and kissed me. I felt her hand go behind my neck, as her fingers went through my hair, stroking it gently for a second, which turned me on, sending a thrill through my spine. As I was sitting down, she almost sat on my lap. We were alone in the

tent – for the moment anyway. She moved to get closer, breathing in silence. I let her do whatever she desired. I knew she was moving, while her hands touched my legs. I looked up in her eyes, but she spoke in a low voice:

“It's better you don't look.”

“Ok, I won't.”

I wondered if she was going to take off something really soon, but then there were voices outside the entrance and she retreated at once. I got up. The powerful desire still lingered around us. We went reluctantly in different directions, the space between us like the deep water of a lake, reverberating with magnetic power.

It was close to midnight when we returned to our quarters. The camp had to turn off all lights, so we just stood there in the dark, in our bunker beds, under the rough blankets, ready to fall asleep. It was cold. I was sure Seloren was awake.

“Seloren... are you sleeping?”

She yawned.

“Not anymore now. What?”

“I don't know... I wonder... It doesn't matter.”

“Did you wake me up just to be silent?”

She raised her head, resting on one elbow and looking up.

“Say it, Ky. What's on your mind?”

“Do you think we'll be together after this?”

“I want to see the war over first“, she replied, not answering my question. “I hope it's just an episode and we'll get on with our lives.”

I remained silent. I didn't know what her words meant, so I didn't say anything anymore. I wondered if I was just an episode for her too. I wondered if her life was a sequence of separate distinct episodes and she was eager to get from one to the next, leaving behind any past experiences. In the many years of her absence I would often remember those words: “just an episode”... and I would be haunted by them, resigned to

accept that version of our story, that my love didn't matter to her.

She sensed that something was wrong. Her voice became softer:

“I was so anxious waiting for you today. I hoped you'd be back safe.”

I still didn't say anything. She continued:

“Ky? Tell me a poem. Poems are a good remedy against anxiety. And they're a better alternative to this war...”

I thought about the poems I knew.

“I wandered lonely as a cloud...”

She laughed.

“Come on, not that one.”

“Don't you like *Ode to the Daffodils*? I learned it in school, in English class.”

“You're good.”

I smiled.

“I know, right? How about *No man is an island*?”

“I'm not sure I want to know what follows.”

“Okay, here's a better one:

*somewhere i have never travelled, gladly beyond
any experience, your eyes have their silence:
in your most frail gesture are things which enclose me
or which i cannot touch because they are too near”*

Seloren was listening, but I didn't continue. She inquired:

“And then?”

I confessed:

“I forgot the rest, but I like most the last line: *nobody, not even the rain, has such
small hands*”

That's E.E.Cummings.”

“ Let me guess: English class again?”

“Yeah. What about you? Can you recite a poem?”

“I don't know... I only know lyrics from some songs.”

“Those are good enough.”

“I'm not reciting anything. I won't compete with you... You're the master of words.”

“That's true. Yet you're the science expert. The camp relies on you to find a cure for the damaged troops.”

“It gives me anxiety to think about it.”

“You can focus. I'm sure you're doing very well.”

We stood there in the dark, thinking in silence. And then I heard her again, in a different tone:

“Will we ever get home?”

“Sure we will”, I said and I wanted to sound certain of it.

She looked up. I could feel her bright eyes in the night, fixed on me, shining intensely.

“Ky...? I'm cold. Please come here, next to me.”

As I was hesitating, she added:

“Please ... for us. I wish we could get away from this place and be alone together. Yet this night is ours anyway. Please come here. Do it for us...”

Her words “*for us*” convinced me instantly. It was an irresistible invitation and the idea of “*us*” melted my soul in a blink of an eye. The soft yet decisive and pleading tone of her voice was also impossible to say no to. Her desire was implied, steady and so overwhelming it couldn't be concealed from her eyes, even in the dark. She seemed more daring than me, taking that risk in that big dorm where we weren't alone. I suddenly didn't care who else was around us anymore.

I took my blanket and stepped down, slipping under the covers next to her. We stared at each other for a moment.

“Roll up above me”, she whispered.

I covered her body with mine, staring in her half closed eyes. She let me kiss her endlessly, slowly breathing together. I held her and she melted in my embrace, anticipating it as if since forever. Our embrace awakened in my soul an infinity of unspoken and unwritten poems, the most poetic anyone could envision with the eyes of the soul, more than words would be able to capture - for what was poetry anyway, other than the art of unfolding the meaning, writing the unwritten and wording the wordless significance only to redefine it speechlessly, erasing words into infinite awareness and absolute amazement... being alive, inspired by absolute bliss.

The next morning arrived with sunlight over snow, making it dazzling bright.

We woke up confused and sleepy, as if we were just arriving on that mountain from another planet. It was hard to leave that warm embrace to step out in the snow, but we had to do it.

On that day we were told we had to wait for new orders. So we were rather free around the camp. I was given a small notebook with blank pages and told to make a list, to estimate how many land mines we might need to secure the camp around us. I measured the area, counted the steps, figured out the number. I sat down in the sun, made the list, then stared ahead, at the blank pages in front of me. I was tempted to write something. I wanted to write a poem for Seloren, but my mood was not lifted enough after thinking about the land mines. So instead, I started writing a story about the war and two teenagers falling in love.

Seloren was just coming from the infirmary tent when her eyes spotted me scribbling in the notebook. She was immediately interested. She came closer.

“What are you writing there?”

“Oh, nothing important.”

She grinned with her usual irony.

“Yeah, I bet... Let me see!”

“Not yet. In a minute. It's a story, I have to finish it.”

I had to hide the notebook behind my back, as she was peeking at it, fascinated by my handwriting.

“Let me see, please.”

“I'll let you read soon. Just a minute more.”

“Okay then, I'll wait.”

She found the trunk of a tree nearby and sat down in the sun, her head back, closing her eyes as the light was warming her face. I looked at her, suddenly more inspired and I started writing faster. When I ended the story, I handed her the notebook.

“Here, you can read it now.”

She opened it and as soon as she started reading, she was totally captivated. She smiled, then laughed, then ran her hand through her hair, from time to time raising her eyes to look at me with a mixture of amazement, surprise and enthusiasm. At one point, tears started streaming down her face, rolling across her delicate skin, and I simply stood there, completely stunned, speechlessly watching the way she was affected by what I had written. It perplexed me how much it changed her feelings, overwhelming her with emotions. In the end, she looked at me with her clear eyes full of tears, yet still smiling, a smile that brightened her entire being, as if her soul was overflowing. I couldn't have described her at that moment: it was a sight that words could never portray.

“When did I die for you?” she asked me simply, with such love in her voice that I instantly regretted that ending.

I was already sorry I made the girl get shot in the narrative. At the time it had seemed more significant to show that war had devastating consequences, but I already wished I had written a happy ending instead. Years later I still wished I could have given it a different perspective.

My answer was just as inconclusive:

“You didn't die, but metaphorically speaking, we began another chapter when we came here.”

She kept staring at me with that admiring light in her eyes. I was glad she had enjoyed the story so much, despite its final downfall that I couldn't change anymore at that point, even if I wanted to.

“This story was written for me”, she said very convinced, as if she knew that truth better than myself. “I don't think you realize that, but you wrote it for me. I don't think anyone else would understand it the same way, or see its meaning. Can I have it? Can you give me this notebook?”

I smiled.

“Sure! You can keep it.”

As much as I wished I had chosen a different ending, I was however glad that it made her happy to have it. To my amazement, she seemed absolutely thrilled to keep the story. She held the notebook to her chest, as if it were a treasure, and placed it carefully inside her backpack.

We didn't have enough time or permission to enjoy each other. Seloren wanted to be alone with me, and I felt the same, but we knew we had to wait until the war would be over. The army made our schedule and forbid our interaction. Yet we found a way to be together, even under the strict surveillance of the officers. When we were lined up in the morning we made a habit of giving each other folded scribbled notes, with messages that were like little secrets that we carried with us through the day. Our love surpassed the world around and we shared it as if our complicity was invincible, unbreakable, magnetic and everlasting, influencing us each day to be peaceful and happy, in an undercover correspondence, an exchange that gave meaning to our lives. We went on endlessly about it, keeping us connected even when we were apart. I read her messages with delight: *I need you* or *I miss you*, *I was thinking of you yesterday*, *let's go to a hotel and*

get a room away from here, what if we could get away together, or even let's do it in the bathroom – that one surely made me smile. We imagined we could be free to do as we wished, which was to share that love that we had to camouflage from the army by easily sneaking around with it, as others were unsuspecting of how deeply we felt and how close we dared to be together, under the ongoing scrutiny and orders.

If we ever got married, I think it would be cool to go to parties and act as if we're just getting to know each other, pretend we're falling in love all over again. We'd be shy, holding hands, as if we're discovering each other once more, taking our time with that, Seloren wrote on a piece of paper. *Let's get an apartment together,* she wrote another day and I imagined what it would be like, a serene, peaceful place where I would be with her, as I couldn't get enough of her presence.

I enjoyed reading her fantasies, drifting in dreams we created for each other. It was like a coded game, speaking about a possible future as if it was waiting for us, coming very soon. I also wrote longer letters for her, about how much I wanted us to get away from the war and travel together wherever we would like, wherever the road would go.

It was all we had: dreams of a future where we could be free to love each other. The feeling was so real and we were so convinced we would be undeniably and irreversibly together, that we felt invincible against the war.

One day she confessed to me:

“With you I learned that love is love, no matter who you love or where you are. Love is the same, no matter what.”

I didn't think our love was like any other, but I was glad she considered she had understood something important, a truth of life that was revealed only from our being together. If she thought that love could exist no matter what circumstances it faced, then we had a chance for the future.

We thought we would forever share that feeling, defying everything.

However, it wasn't as everlasting as we believed it would be. One day I had to go

on another mission to install mines in the snow, around the area of the camp. When we came back we found the camp torn upside down: in our absence the tents had been devastated.

Seloren was gone from the camp. The enemies had tracked us down, avoided the mine traps, shot the guards, stolen our equipment and taken the medical unit as prisoners. I was overwhelmed by the fatality of the event. Somehow, I thought it was my fault: not placing enough mines around the camp. I felt as if I was being punished. I blamed myself for not doing my best to keep her safe. I suddenly realized that my life would never be the same without her. I could not see myself go on in her absence. I was pacing around the torn tents, feeling I would go mad if I didn't do something immediately.

“We've got to get them back! We should go right now!” I shouted desperately to the others.

“Calm down, soldier! We'll search for them, but we can't do it in daylight. We'll wait for the dark.”

I had to wait.

It seemed like centuries until the night came.

We tracked the signal from the stolen equipment and went over the cliffs, to the broken antenna. We stopped at a distance. Everything seemed too quiet. The silence was hiding something: we could sense danger. Something was not right. And then we distinguished a silhouette in the snow: Seloren was tied to the broken antenna, at the sight of the explosion. I felt my breathing stop and my heart froze instantly.

“Give me the binoculars!”

I looked through the night vision lenses: there she was. Seloren was tied to the broken metal structure, her hands behind her back. I noticed something else: a belt of wires around her waist. I put down the binoculars, almost ready to jump and run towards her. The officer grabbed my arm:

“Be careful, soldier. It's a trap.”

“Let me go! I can do it, I can defuse the explosives!”

“They want you to go there. They might detonate it the moment you get close.”

“I don't care! I have to try. I can't sit here and do nothing!”

The officer looked at me. I was too determined. I couldn't sit and wait any longer.

He let go of my arm, so I moved ahead in the snow.

I rolled downhill as fast as was physically possible. At that moment I felt the boundaries of my strength become surreal, my resources endless, my energy fueled by the night above. I expected bullets to fly by, but there was only silence. The silence was worse than guns.

Seloren saw me approach the broken metal tower. Her eyes glistened in the dark.

“Don't come any closer! Stay there, Ky!” she whispered alarmed.

I didn't listen to her. I kept moving, crawling, rolling until I was near her.

I saw the countdown timer on her belt, the screen with red numbers running fast.

“You can't defuse this. They made sure of it. We'll blow up.” she warned me.

“If we do, at least we blow up together”, I said through my teeth and I examined the wires, intensely concentrating on their color stripes: blue and yellow or red and green? It had to be red. It could have been yellow. The darkness made it difficult to distinguish. I looked up at Seloren.

“Are you scared?”

“Yes...”

“Do you trust me?”

“Yes.”

“Then you shouldn't be scared.”

I glanced at the wires again. The colors were confusing. My hands were trembling. She trusted me, but I didn't trust myself. I couldn't tell her that.

“Two minutes”, she announced.

“No problem. I've got this.”

I thought I would take a chance: cut the blue or the red?

I couldn't ask her.

“Roses are red, violets are blue...” I said to myself.

Seloren smiled.

“Are you nuts?...”

The countdown had one minute left. I tried to make a decision.

“The grass is green, daffodils are yellow...”

“Ky, we've got thirty seconds!...”

“I know.”

“Twenty!”

“Okay, okay!”

I closed my eyes for a moment. Green, yellow, red, blue... and then I cut the wire.

I waited. The countdown had stopped. We were still alive.

Yet I had one more problem to solve. I looked at the other timer: approaching fifty seconds fast. The wires were both black. That was more difficult: I could only guess. I decided not to.

“Listen”, I said, “I'll cut the rope from your hands first and then the buckle of this belt. When I tell you to run, just run as fast as you can, okay?”

She nodded, unable to say anything. I took out the knife and cut the rope that was keeping her tied to the metal bars. Then I sliced the buckle of the explosive belt she was wearing, taking it off her back. I knew there were less than ten seconds left.

“Run now!” I yelled at her and she started in a frenzy towards the top of the hill.

I threw the belt high up in the opposite direction and tried to jump away from that tower. By the time I took the second leap I heard the belt blow off in the air, a rain of flames and burning sparks above me, like fireworks coloring the snow.

I don't know what happened next.

3.

Coming Out to Light

I survived that night. I woke up many days later, but I was confined to intensive care and my recovery lasted for more than one month.

I lost track of Seloren. We were separated. As soon as I felt better, I asked around, but I couldn't find her. Even after the war was over, I didn't have any clue how or where to trace her in the world. The last image I had seen was her running uphill in the snow.

Now do an exercise of imagination: make it one year of absence. Let the clock move ahead, spin it fast forward. Actually, make it five years. Year after year after year... Seven years. Eight. No: you know what? Ten years. In fact, let's be honest: twenty years. How about twenty five? Well, imagine adding this amount of silence: twenty five years passing by without us ever meeting again. I guess years could have reached a hundred, and it still would have been the same situation, had I not kept looking for her, making that step ahead, without ever giving up action ... having a reason and the audacity to surpass the walls, the silence, the emptiness. Through the years, that wasn't enough. It was more than that. I would say we were meant to see each other again.

During the first year without her it was infernally difficult to let her go from my mind. I was mostly torn between anger and regret, not knowing what to do, where to find her. Eventually, I decided to stop thinking about her, since it was pointless and hopeless. I had no idea where she was, who she was with, how that person might have been better for her instead of me. I was sure she had most certainly found someone else and gotten married after the war. I kept remembering her words "just an episode" and I also thought she could have looked for me, had she wanted to.

So I decided to forget her. I decided to free her from my thoughts, in the same way I had cut the explosive wire the last time we had been together. I thought it would be possible. After all, we had spent only a few weeks together. I thought it would be easy to get her out of my soul.

It wasn't.

I managed to convince myself I was over that love experience. I rationalized it. Anytime it would surface in my mind, I tried to erase it, send it back into oblivion, motivate myself beyond it, telling myself I was better off not thinking about it, to just keep going on with my life. And yet some girls I met later reminded me of her. Subconsciously, instinctively, I was probably attracted to something similar to what I had shared with Seloren. I didn't plan it, but it happened. Sometimes, I could not avoid it in any way. It was like ripples on the surface of a lake, the circles were still reverberating; the influence of our coming together was still touching me in some ways, long after we had drifted apart.

I don't know why our encounter had been so powerful: was it the war, or the absolute freedom of love in the middle of battle? Was it the way we matched each other's energy in such a magnetic irresistible way? Had the universe designed us for each other from the beginning, before we were even born into existence or thrown in that war? Did we bring a lesson to each other, about ourselves? It was a total enigma. I'd always seen her as a gift in my life, a miraculous wonder of love. I could understand why she was still shining in my mind, whenever I remembered her name.

Years went by and there were still nights when I would dream about her, appearing right in front of me, with those bright eyes and the light of her smile making reality seem another realm. The comforting dreams ended by morning and I had to learn to live in a reality where she was absent. In twenty five years I was convinced she had encountered a man who could make her happy and she had forgotten the "episode" with me. I was also sure I deserved to find love with someone else, since she wasn't anywhere

anyhow.

However, I was never able to forget: I understood her importance to me was timeless. She was in my system, at the dawn and the definition of who I became. She had been there and she would always mean an invincible love that surpassed the war. A love that went from undercover to light and stood by in the worst of times. A love that had confronted and defied danger, uncertainty, anxiety, chaos, darkness, erasing them with just its presence. A love that had that taming, absolute and effortless power, that gift of serenity inherent. She would always be that light in my mind. She had become a myth of the past, an unattainable, irreplaceable dream. She had been there, in the beginning of my journey through life, at the deciding moment of who I would be, and nothing could ever take it away. The truth of her love, as brief as it had been, had expanded in significance and stayed undeleted, invincible through twenty five years.

I traveled a lot and saw many places and many people. My life was in continuous motion. Whenever I thought about her, I wondered if she might have something to say to me, or if I had become totally insignificant to her. I was still eager to find her, but I also doubted that she wanted to have anything to do with me in the present. Maybe she wanted to forget the war, the chaos, the love that had happened in such a short time. I had no idea what she could feel, so I focused on the people who were actually present in my life.

Yet it seemed unfair the way our lives had taken separate directions and I wished for some kind of a sign, a word, anything. I would have given anything to just be able to say “hello” to her once again. I wanted to apologize for not being wise enough when I was younger. I wanted to tell her who I had become. I kept searching online, but she was nowhere in the virtual internet. There was no trace of her: it was as if she was hiding. I wondered if I would ever see her again.

And then one day, I saw her.

She was at a conference, speaking about some new science discoveries. I saw her in

an interview on television. I immediately recognized her, even if she was slightly changed in appearance: she was wearing glasses and had cut her hair shorter. However, her eyes and smile had remained the same. Her calm and detached attitude, her reflective thoughts that moved like shades in her eyes when she was glancing sideways, everything was well known to me. I was instantly euphoric and fascinated to see her after so many years, to know what she was doing. It was unbelievably miraculous. I searched for the address of the lab that had organized the conference and decided to send her a message, written in a book – and then see if she wanted to respond in any way. I hoped she would feel safe enough and tempted to reach out to me. I hoped I could create that invitation that would get her out of the shell of silence, distance and time. I wondered if she would recognize me, if she could appreciate the person I'd become. And I waited. Days went by with no sign. Many questions were on my mind. Doubt had started to settle in my thoughts: maybe she didn't want to talk to me again.

And then one evening, out of the blue, the words appeared on the screen of my mobile phone:

“I do want to reach out to you”.

I knew it was her. She had answered my message.

“Here I am”, I texted immediately, in a second.

She paused for a moment. Then her words appeared on my screen:

“What took us so long??”

I smiled. Happiness overwhelmed me. I wanted to answer something, but I couldn't explain to her the long years, the doubts and the silence. I just typed:

“I always searched for you.”

“I didn't know.”

“I thought you'd never answer. Ever again.”

“I thought you'd never write.”

Her reply made me smile once more. She was incredible with her answers, as she

had been when we fell in love.

She continued:

“I almost fainted when I saw your handwriting again.”

“I promised I'd give you a book.”

“Yes, you did. And I believed you.”

“You believed in me. Thank you.”

“I knew, somehow.”

It was amazing how easily we slipped into talking to each other, as if the years had dissipated into mere dust and we had been together just a day before, up in the mountains, staring at each other, inseparably and equally overwhelmed by that magnetic, mesmerizing feeling.

“I missed you in my life”, she wrote again the words and I was at once exhilarated and liberated by that miracle that she still felt the same for me.

It was as if a veil of silent emptiness, heavy with twenty five years had been lifted from my mind and my soul, freeing me instantly: it was an incredible relief to understand the truth, that she had actually missed me. I felt I was flying above the entire world. It was safe enough to be sincere.

“I missed you so much”, I wrote.

“Here we are now.”

“I've been waiting for this moment for decades.”

“Let's not waste anymore of those... decades, I mean.”

Everything she said was right and it made me smile continuously, as I was staring at the phone. I recognized her completely beyond the words that appeared on the screen, as if she was standing right in front of me, with that enticing smile, with that light in her eyes, with that confirmation that made me feel redeemed and loved beyond any doubt.

“This must be something special, if we're unforgettable to each other”, I typed.

Her reply was again unmistakably certain:

“That's not debatable. I remember everything. The nights under the blankets and up on the roof... the story you wrote in the snow... you reciting poems...”

“It's like a dream.”

“Yes, emotions are overwhelming...”

And then she added, unexpectedly and somehow eagerly:

“Would it be possible to imagine we could see each other again?”

I had no hesitation about it:

“Absolutely.”

“I would really like to go away with you”, she typed.

“I want that too”, I answered.

“When can you?”

“Anytime. How about April?”

We were in March. I thought we would have enough time to plan everything.

She agreed.

“Good. We'll do that. My favorite place is an ancient romantic city. Where would you like to go?”

“I like the islands, but it doesn't matter.”

“Islands are hard to get away from.”

“That's the idea”, I smiled.

We didn't make any precise plans that evening. I was ready to go anywhere with her, as long as we would be together. I realized we never had any opportunity to spend time away from the war, to just enjoy each other, free and happy, as we had dreamt long ago. However, we had been free and happy even then, despite the battles around us: it had been our miracle - an undercover love that defied circumstances and enhanced the meaning of life.

“I was dying to read your letter, when I got the envelope”, Seloren typed again.

“I wanted to remind you of the days when we were happy together.”

“We were happy”, she admitted.

And we felt so happy that evening too, typing on our phones for hours, after twenty five years, as if they had gone in a blink of an eye. Finding each other was completely shifting the borders of reality again: everything I had thought about her and about us during the long years had to be redefined into a happier version... into a better truth. The universe was miraculous again and life had suddenly much more meaning.

“I think I'll go to sleep now.” she told me later that night.

“Okay, good night. I'll be here if you need me”, I replied.

“Good night.”

I stared at the phone, almost not believing what a wonderful thing had just happened to us: finding each other in that way, as if time didn't really exist.

I told myself I would never let her go again. She would never be lost from me, ever.

And yet, I didn't anticipate the outside events that were rolling in the dark.

Something happened just a few days after we found each other on our phones.

A malfunction from a nuclear plant generated radioactive smoke and clouds that turned into rain. It spread radioactive particles from one country to another, to the entire globe. It spread out until it covered most continents.

At first, I thought we would simply postpone our plans of meeting each other, but then the situation got out of control. Seloren was off the phone most of the time and I couldn't get any information about her, or from her. As a lab scientist, she was requested to work day and night to find a solution for the people who had been affected by the radioactive burns.

I could only get brief messages from her, informing me that she was tired and had a hard time. I couldn't intervene, couldn't help and would not be allowed to get near her anyway. I imagined she had been asked to help at the site of the nuclear plant and I wondered if she was one of those researchers wrapped up in isolation suits, working with

dangerous chemicals. The radiation seemed extremely risen beyond safety levels and I waited day by day to hear that Seloren was okay.

I couldn't believe we had just found each other after twenty five years, only to face another separation again. It suddenly seemed so unfair. I was determined I wouldn't let it take her away from me, but there wasn't much I could do about it.

I wondered if the universe had brought us together again just to confirm that our love had been true. I wondered if that new wave of chemical poisoning, radioactive wind and whatever else was going on turned out to be just another way of keeping us apart.

In a few days, Seloren stopped responding to my texts and I was left wondering what was actually happening. I hoped she was just busy. I hoped she would tell me she was fine.

“I can't lose you again”, I typed a message to Seloren.

“It's just been a rough week, I'm working 13 hours a day. I didn't sleep much”, she replied and I understood I had to let her be.

“I hope you stay safe”.

She answered:

“You too.”

And that was it: silence again. I couldn't say anything more. I didn't dare add to her worries and anxiety. I had no idea what her life was like at that moment. I only remembered how she had fallen asleep in my arms, long ago, and I wished I could comfort her again just by being there for her. And yet, that was no longer possible, with the radiation keeping her away from me. Ironically, we had found each other only to be kept apart.

At least we exchanged a few messages, I thought to myself. It was more than I would have dreamed to become possible during the long years of our silent absence from each other's lives. Yet knowing I could suddenly contact her but it would not solve anything was a thought that kept bothering me like an undercurrent of subconscious

rebellion.

In the meantime, because of my military training and experience in the past, I was called to join an army team that would wipe the streets with a particular foam that could neutralize the chemicals. The town seemed deserted, as if everybody had gone to a shelter against radiation. We were wearing masks and suits that could reduce radiation and chemicals, riding on the side of firefighting trucks and spraying the sidewalks, the buildings, the asphalt, everything in sight.

At night, we roamed the parks, to spray the grass and the trees. As I was looking at the moon and the stars, listening to the hidden birds, watching the shadows of tree branches I wondered how deep the level of radiation could be, if nature was so peaceful and full of hope. There was something magical about spring time: trees full of flowers rising across the clear blue sky, the little night lamps in the grass that looked like blue stars scattered on the ground, the smell of earth, fresh plants, washed out dust and the bright swirling colors in daytime, everything was contradictory to the idea that the world stood still, threatened by the dangerous chemicals and radioactive atmosphere. Nature was so miraculous: it kept flourishing, thriving, shining brighter. It was stronger than human mistakes. I wondered why humans were so careless about it, taking for granted everything that was valuable in their lives.

I wondered if Seloren and I had done the same thing: taking for granted what we had together, by not doing enough to find each other again.

I remembered her confession to me long ago, when we were in the mountains and I had returned from a walk in the snow: *"I wanted to say I love you, but it sounds better to say I need you"*, she had written on one of those notes for me. Those three words "I need you" had been such a treasure in my mind. I wished she could say them again, but there was only endless silence that I couldn't break anymore. I missed her deeply. I remembered the closeness we had shared and wished I could look in her eyes, but I didn't know if that would ever be a reality again.

One day, I finally got an answer to my text. I couldn't stay away anymore, I had to contact her.

"I couldn't forget that year when we were together", I wrote to her.

"I want to remember more", she replied.

It seemed a positive answer, so I continued:

"Where are you?"

Instead of answering, she sent me a satellite map with her location.

I looked at the address. I decided to go there and find her.

"Can I come over?" I texted. "I miss your eyes."

"I don't look the same as years ago."

I already knew what she looked like. I had seen her on television. I still recognized her.

"What time is convenient for you? Would you like to meet me somewhere?" I asked.

"I can't get out of the house. I'm too sick for that", she confessed. "I've been isolated indoors for eight weeks already. This radiation altered my health and I'm not allowed to walk in the contaminated streets. But you can come over."

I felt worried about her: the sudden disclosure of her unstable health made me want to be there to comfort her. That situation explained her silence and reserved messages.

I jumped on the first plane to get there as soon as I could.

When I arrived, it was raining again. The streets were deserted and the peaceful water dripping on the roofs reminded me of the time when we were in the mountains, together, so unexpectedly yet irrevocably in love. I still felt the same way for her: she had a special place in my memory. She represented a love that had been so liberating, secretly sweet and deep, expanding and unfolding under the limitations of strict, conventional, oblivious circumstances. I could remember it as if only a few days had gone by.

I arrived there at the time when the evening was slowly spreading shadows of a dim light, filtered by the rain, over the empty town. My heart was beating faster by the minute, as I advanced on the sidewalk. The moment I turned the corner I already saw her standing there, in front of the building. She had come to the entrance to greet me, in case I wouldn't know where to look. I saw her from afar, in the open door, staring along the empty street, with her arms folded around her, as if she felt cold. I wondered if she would recognize me. I had grown a mustache and wasn't wearing the army uniform anymore. I had a casual jacket, jeans, baseball cap and snickers. I could have been anyone, in that empty street.

I kept advancing towards her and then her eyes noticed me. I was the only one walking around at that hour. She probably guessed or recognized me at once. She made a gesture with her hand, waving hello through the rain.

I felt my breathing freeze in the humid air, as my heart was almost beating out of my chest. I stopped in front of her. We looked at each other and smiled. Her eyes were sparkling with that deep light that I recognized. She seemed a bit tired, but the abyss of light in her stare was just the same and I got dizzy and lost in it once again, like long ago, hypnotized and fascinated. It didn't matter how we had changed in time: the thrill of the encounter was overwhelming.

“Hi Seloren”.

“Let's get inside, I can't be out too much”, she replied.

We went inside the hallway and got into the elevator. When we got out, we paused there in the half dark corridor, looking at each other. It had been a long time, but I could recognize everything about her. We locked glances for what seemed like minutes. I could sense something was shining in her stare. I could feel the sizzling attraction between us, in the dark corridor, waiting. As we stood there, she leaned with her back against the wall and I felt drawn to take that step closer and kiss her. I didn't have any hesitation. It felt like long ago for a moment, her lips melting under mine, our desires

getting to our heads. The mesmerizing energy of us together was once again in my life and I couldn't get enough of it.

But then, she looked away.

"I'm confused", she whispered and she turned to unlock the door.

I sensed something was wrong. I followed her inside.

"Would you like something to drink?" she offered politely.

"Just tea. It's a bit cold outside."

"Tea it is then."

She brought me a steamy cup and we sat at the coffee table, looking at each other again, in lost contemplation. Something worried me about her. There was a distance that I couldn't understand, a foggy uncertainty in her gestures. I told myself twenty five years were indeed a long time.

"So how are you?" I asked her.

"It's been rough lately. The radiation is messing with my brain. I'm trying to keep cool, but it's not easy."

She sipped the tea from her cup, then looked at me through the steam.

"And you? "

"I'm fine. I'm doing great, actually. I've been a free man ever since the war ended. I feel so liberated and alive. I'm so happy to see you again!"

"It's been a long time."

"Yeah, but I still remember everything like it was yesterday."

She looked down. She wrapped the robe around her, as if trying to shield herself.

"This is a bit too intense for me. I don't remember very well what we were... what was. I have some sort of amnesia from the exposure to radioactive environment. Give me some time to figure things out."

I felt the earth sink beneath my feet, dragging me down with it, on a slope I hadn't expected. My enthusiasm had hit a wall. My mind was spinning. It seemed so unfair. I

looked at her, wondering if she actually didn't feel the same for me anymore and was using the radiation as an excuse. I was sure there had been other men that had sparked her interest in such a long time, but I still felt I should have been the one who deserved to be with her, despite everything. It was hard to understand why she suddenly didn't remember anything anymore.

The evening was getting darker somehow, weighing on my shoulders.

“You don't remember us? I can't believe it!” I said. “You're the closest lover I ever had!”

My confession was unexpected to her. She looked down.

“I didn't know that. I guess I don't think of you as a lover now.”

“You'll always be a lover in my memory. We were lovers and we were very much in love, you can't possibly deny that. You can't change the past, you can't take it away. You're lying to yourself.”

She backed off a little, admitting:

“Maybe I lied to myself. I remember some things, but not as much as you. You seem to know more than I do about those days. Besides, you disappeared. I wondered for many years why you decided that.”

“I didn't disappear! The bomb blew me away – that bomb that was tied to you! I was in recovery and looked for you afterwards, but couldn't find you anywhere.”

Her words kept blowing my mind away. Everything she said was unexpected and it left me bewildered. I suddenly felt alone with the story of us long ago. I realized she had left me then in the snow, and she was leaving me again, by denying the past.

She glanced at me from behind the glasses, pleading:

“I hope you don't disappear again. I missed my extraordinary friend.”

“We were more than friends”, I replied, perplexed at the way she was turning things around, contrary to what she had said and done long ago, contrary to what I had known about us my entire life.

I couldn't wrap my mind around how she had forgotten about us and the depth of the feeling we had shared. She had seemed so enthusiastic in the beginning. I couldn't understand how exposure to radiation would erase her memories of us to such an extent.

I couldn't deal with it anymore. I knew the truth and it was so important to me, while she was trying to destroy it with a lie.

I stood up.

“Look, I don't want to be just friends with you. It's not right, what you're doing. Please don't do this.”

“I understand you're upset. I would be too. I don't know if I'm ever going to remember us again. It might take months or even years to get out of this amnesia. The effects might be permanent.”

I stared at her, unable to accept it. I felt the hit like a ton of bricks in my soul. There was only one thing left for me to do: turn around and go. Before leaving, I tried one more time to reach an understanding with her:

“Maybe you don't remember what we had then, but what about now? Do you think I qualify as someone you could fall in love again? “

She looked at me as if she was evaluating her feelings. Her glance had some distance in it. Eventually, she lowered her eyes.

“That's a difficult question.”

“It isn't. It's either yes or no.”

I breathed deeply. I already knew her answer, from her attitude.

“Give me time to figure it out”, she said again.

“This means it's not a yes. When you think you can love me more than a friend, let me know.”

I walked towards the door, and she followed me, hesitating. She paused in the doorway.

“Thanks for the tea”, I said before getting out. “And thank you for the love that I

experienced with you. I know what I lived then. I just wish it could have a different ending.”

“You don't need to be so dramatic”.

“I'm not dramatic, but this is hard for me.”

She seemed resigned to accept my protest as justified.

“I probably don't deserve your love anyway. I'm just average.”

“You were never average in my eyes.”

I stared at her in silence. I was sure I loved her just as I had in the mountains, but I knew I had to let her wake up from that unexplained amnesia, by herself.

I had been convinced we had both been missing out a lot from each other, from our lives. I had hoped we would come to our senses eventually and realize we could be happy together. Our love wouldn't need to stay undercover anymore. We could be free lovers this time.... free in daylight, without hiding, without any worries. And yet, she didn't see it my way. She didn't remember loving me.

Walking alone in the rain, after the night had covered the silent town, I wondered what I could say to remind Seloren of the past: what could bring back the memory of that love. I was sure we had magic between us. I knew we would have it forever, no matter what, and if she could overcome the amnesia, she would rediscover that we were really good together. I was certain we could love each other just the same – or even more, despite the twenty five years of absence.

However, her denial made me wonder if that girl in the mountains was no longer there, and the one I met that evening was another person. I wondered if the Seloren I knew had lost her trace in the snow, on that day when the bomb blew off. Doubt was challenging me. I didn't want to let her go, but I also had to let her make up her mind if she wanted me again. I sensed there still was a current of magnetic attraction underneath our interaction that evening, something that could resurface and revive itself, if we could just give in to it. I couldn't get it out of my mind how she let me kiss her by the elevator.

The way she kissed me had not been a lie. I knew the chemistry and emotional magnetic bond we used to have were overflowing under the surface of amnesia and time. We had to have that chance to overcome past limitations and recreate a better version of us together, liberated.

It crossed my mind the following days that I should take her away to a place where she could feel better: a clean safe environment where she would be at peace, to recover her health and focus her mind. I looked up tourist destinations: cabins in the mountains, waterfalls, forests, lakes... I found something that was just right. I booked tickets for a cabin in the mountains, near a lake and a waterfall. The view was breathtaking. The forest was green, pastures clean and high up the mountain top, the water falling into the lake was so pure one could see the pebbles at the bottom. There was a small wooden cabin right next to the lake and I booked it for two weeks. I decided we could extend the time if Seloren enjoyed it. I hoped the environment would be enough to start feeling better and finally be free from everything else. And free to remember.

I only needed her to say yes.

I called her and told her I was coming over. I owned a motorcycle, so I rode to her building, and stopped under her window. She heard the engine and looked down. I saw her face in the window, with the smoky dark glasses, as if hiding in the reflection.

“Come on! Let's go for a ride!” I shouted at her, as I kept the engine running.

She smiled. I thought she wouldn't accept, but in a few minutes she was at the door. I wondered if she would feel cold in the thin blue jeans and raincoat.

She sat behind me, and her arms wrapped around my body, as I had dreamed for so many times in the past years. Her touch reminded me that everything was right as long as we were together.

I started the motorcycle and went slowly at first. She leaned her head on my back. I could feel her temple on my shoulder, as I was riding along the empty streets. We went on and on, I didn't want to stop. The speed increased and I could only feel her arms

around me, a tight grip that wouldn't let go. We had to be together again, I thought. We belonged together. I felt it so deep, right to my bones.

The rain had stopped and there was some sunlight coming through the clouds, shining on the wet leaves and grass. The sky was clearing up, and as we got to the park it was almost light blue everywhere, with soft fluffy white dissipating.

I didn't want to end our ride, as I didn't want her to take her arms off me. It felt like the most reassuring moment since I had found her again. I didn't want to let her go: however, I was ready to give her the freedom to feel, think and consider how much she wanted me in her life.

I stopped the engine by the gates of the big park. We jumped off the bike and she looked around, with a refreshed smile.

“Thank you for taking me out. I've been locked inside for weeks...”

She inhaled the clean air, smelling of trees. As I watched her walk beside me, I remembered how much I enjoyed her presence.

“I missed seeing you move around”, I said.

“I don't move around that much anymore... I'm rather lazy”, she answered.

“It's not about the speed. It's about you being you.”

“Whatever that means.”

“I enjoy your presence, as I used to.”

“I might be disappointing now in many ways” she replied.

I was a bit bewildered that she was turning around and diminishing everything I was saying about me appreciating her. I thought she needed time to get used to me again. I wondered if she would ever find me attractive, as the man I had become through the years.

“It's been a long time since we were around each other”, I admitted.

“Twenty five years”

“Right.”

We advanced along the alleys.

“You once said you hoped you wouldn't disappoint me so much that I would end up hating you”, I reminded her.

“Apparently, I said many things that seemed deep, but I was too young then. I was just trying to figure out many things. I was just an average girl.”

“What you said was special to me.”

“Because you loved me.”

“Yes, I loved you. But what you said was special because you were so, so, sooo... unlike any others I knew. I loved you because of that. I still love that girl, I wish she didn't get lost in the mountains, in my story”.

I knew she would remember the story I wrote in the forest.

“Funny”, she replied, but I didn't think so.

I found it a bit sad that she didn't remember.

She remained silent.

She just walked along by my side for a while. Then she said simply:

“You remember moments, words, everything. I only remember it was intense, but not the details. I remember kissing you, but not many other memories.”

I smiled.

“At least you remember the kisses. That means it was good enough to remember.”

I took her hand, touching her fingers slightly. I had longed for so many years to touch her again. Her pale, thin fingers were warm and cold at the same time, interlaced with mine. I got suddenly enthusiastic:

“Let's get away, travel together. I'd go anywhere with you. I've got tickets for a cabin in the mountains, by a waterfall and a lake, it's very beautiful. Let's go there tomorrow and be free. You can take time off to heal and feel better... and remember how good it was together. Let's go there and get to know each other again, like you said long ago...”

“Are you always so serious, or just now with me?”

“I'm serious. You just forgot it...”

She didn't answer. My heart cringed at the thought that she was too tired, too hurt by whatever past she had experienced in my absence, too sick from the radiation, too resigned and used to a life without the certainty of love to ever say yes to my plan.

I was aware it was possible she wouldn't see the point, that she couldn't remember her feelings for me. I wondered if she could see any value in us anymore. I didn't want to believe the girl she used to be was completely lost in the past. I had felt her presence in our recent conversations. She had to still be there... something from her was still the same, the way she responded to me, the way she walked by my side.

I confronted her about it:

“If there's not much left of that girl inside you now, what have you been doing here with me? Is it so different now between us?”

“I have no memories of us anymore and I'm really sorry for that”, she replied. “Who I am right now is a result of everything that's been going on in my head for the past years and I am not sorry because this is who I am.”

She sounded defensive.

I was ready to accept that we both were different people than we had been twenty five years ago. I also understood she might never recover her memory of us - she might never get out of the amnesia. I had to deal with that and start again. I wanted to believe we had found each other for a good reason: we still had something that was right between us.

“We are who we are now. What we are doing here together is what I want to know” I said and she spoke immediately, as if she had already thought about it before:

“I have absolutely no idea. Reconnecting with you is fabulous. This is all I know. However, I feel some tension and it scares me, but otherwise it's still great talking to you.”

“What tension? From me?”

“Yes, obviously. You want to know things. I don't know how to answer.”

Suddenly, uncertainty infused the atmosphere through the pale light of the afternoon, over the wet park. I realized the person that was walking with me might have become very different from the girl I once knew. She didn't recognize herself anymore and maybe I had to reconsider who she was too. I had to give her time to decide if she wanted to go on a trip with me – and see where that would take us. I wasn't on a mission to convince her of anything. I wanted everything to flow naturally between us. It didn't matter if she would never remember the past, ever again. If we had something good together in the present, that would be a new beginning... for what exactly, I didn't know either. There was something mesmerizing in the way she kept saying “You”, “I”. It matched the way I said “together”. We were effortlessly matching each other somehow, beyond time, beyond her amnesia or my memories, we were synchronized again without even realizing it.

I knew I didn't want to let her go and I was sure she felt the same.

“Don't answer right now”, I told her. “Think about it until tomorrow and then give me a call when you decide. I'll be ready with the tickets and I'll come pick you up, if you say yes. I'm not asking you to do anything but come along on a journey... go away with me.”

I was sure it would help her feel better, getting away from everything for once, with someone who loved her – who could really love her indeed, without a doubt.

“Look how beautiful the sky is. The sun is setting...”

We looked at the colors mixing with some dark clouds in the horizon, the light emerging from behind the line of gray. It was peaceful, yet it wasn't promising in any way.

“Take me home”, Seloren said turning to me in a shiver of cold.

She seemed fragile and reserved. I wanted to hold her and keep her warm, but I

just took her back to her apartment. She got off the bike, wrapping the raincoat around her thin body. I stared at her frail image, wishing I could protect and love her until she would believe in happiness again. I remained on my bike, as she was stepping on the sidewalk.

“I'll call you tomorrow”, she said, shivering under the coat.

I looked at the line of her lips, the bright watery eyes lost in deep thoughts, the refined features of her face and I almost jumped from the bike to take her in my arms, but I didn't. Instead, I said simply:

“I'll be there when you call.”

I watched her vanish inside the building.

I started the engine and turned around, riding along the streets that were getting dark.

I hoped for the best answer from her: it had to be yes. I wanted to remain neutral, to avoid worrying or thinking negative thoughts. I wanted to believe in us. I wanted to believe that a true love like that was possible even after twenty five years, thirty, fifty or a hundred... it was still valuable and strong enough to make us happy even after an eternity of absence. I wanted so much to believe it. A love like that would never ever disappear, would never fade away, despite the circumstances or the denial, despite the long time, the unexpected amnesia or distance... no matter what happened, it couldn't be taken away from us... it had been so deeply undercover, but it was coming to light. I wanted to believe in it beyond everything.

And yet, I wasn't very sure either of what could be again between us. Even if she said yes, I still had to get to know her once more as the person she had become, just as she had to understand who I was in the present. There were no guarantees for us that we would be right for each other again. There was only my belief that we could.

I didn't make any other plans except for us to go away together.

I understood we had a blank page ahead of us. Neither of us could say what we

were going to write on it, in the future. I just knew I wanted a future with her somehow - anyhow. If we were going to fall madly in love again, that remained to be discovered. If we were going to find ourselves as inseparable as we had been, we had yet to let it unfold by itself. If we were going to drift apart again, that was also an option. I almost got ready and willing to accept I could let her go if she didn't want me anymore. I was aware it would be a possibility, to go in different directions in our lives.

However, I wished for a positive answer.

I would only have to wait for her call.

I've been writing this story while I was waiting for it.

Maybe I'll let her read this stuff and hopefully it will trigger some of her memories of us... or just keep it as a reminder, instead of her lost memories.

I can remember our story for both of us. If she reads it, maybe it will come back to her mind.

I don't have much hope that it will get her out of the unexpected amnesia, but it almost doesn't matter now. It's possible that our amazing, deep and beautiful love will come out of the undercover oblivion anyway, to shine freely after so many years of absence, just like the day we walked in the forest together and we saw sunlight appear from behind clouds, clearing up the sky, making us believe in a new beginning.

It won't be a surprise whatever she answers, because no matter what it is, I will still love her forever and ever. She has given me so much during that time we spent in the mountains. She made me believe in the power of love. She loved me in a way I had only dreamed before. Maybe now it's time for me to help her believe in love and happiness again. I have the right to ask her to consider going away with me. And I'm glad I could ask that question. I enjoyed asking. It's mine to ask. It doesn't matter if she says yes or no, because she already said yes in the past, once. Now she only needs to remember how it feels to say yes to me again.

We are free to decide every moment to be happy and to love - under any

circumstance, under any sky, with every heartbeat we have, with every breath that we are alive. If we were lovers then, we can be again. This love we had was never wrong. It was hidden, unexplained, invincible, irresistible, amazingly deep and true, under the restrictions of a war that took us apart eventually. However, if we drifted back together again, that means it wasn't a lie. This love was as real as it gets. It still is. I believe it is. I tell myself we deserve to have it come out into the light now.

I've been waiting for her call all day. It's almost evening.

I think the phone might be ringing now. I hear something.

I hope she'll say yes.

I'll come back to finish the ending of this story, but first I must answer the phone.

Wait a second.



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