

The Dark Hole

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Chapter One

Arriving at Thoroughsome

I will endeavor to write somewhat of the things that are in my heart about my adventure in the Great War. I've seen both light and darkness because of that war, a light that makes everything else seem like a dream, and a darkness that drains away all hope. When the light came there was a hole in me that was so deep, the filling of it overwhelmed me, and I became a simpleton.

I lived in a hole in the ground in the days before the Great War. I don't mean dirt like a rabbit hole. There was a pipe stuck in the ground on the crest of a hill. You entered it by a portal, a round metal door with a hand wheel on its center which controlled the spokes that locked the portal into the rim of the pipe. I had seen such on tops of submarines. Where I lived was like a submarine inside, as though a giant submarine had been sunk into the earth and covered up with a hill. There were dozens of apartments under the hill where people lived separated by these pipes. The vertical pipes led to the outside. The horizontal ones led to the apartments. My apartment was spherical in shape like a bathysphere, only big enough for one or two people to fit in, plus a cat named Meow.

There was a porthole where I could look out and see the brown wooden towers across the way. I could do that because the hill I lived in was high and steep. On the back side of my room was my bunk with a built-in chest of drawers underneath. Because of the rounding of the floor, I used a small ladder to get to my bunk. Another ladder to the right of the porthole led to the

door that opened to a long, dark escape tube. Opposite the bunk were a sink and a stove.

Whenever I was in my room, I would stare out of that porthole on account of my closet-aphobia. It took all the courage I could muster to descend down into that dark hole. I lived under constant fear of being crushed, or some fat visitor coming and getting stuck in the door. I had enough air and light from the porthole. That was one of the reasons I could descend, because the light came in from the outside and through the door up the pipe. Whenever it turned dark I just slept with Meow curled up next to me on the bunk. There was never enough light from the single bulb that hung from the rounded ceiling. I never woke up until it was daylight. In the darkness of winter I was never home except to sleep.

There was running water and gas for the stove in the days before the Great War. They must have been local because as the war approached, the water and gas remained. Whether it ever got turned off or not, I don't know. I didn't stay around when the war finally came.

I don't have any recollection of my parents. I lived on a farm for the first years of my life. They must have just dropped me off there. When I became old enough to carry a small bag of coal, I was treated as one of the farm hands. That's how I figured Anne and Elvin weren't my parents. They fed me and gave me a bed and told me I had to work for my bread and butter just like everyone else.

I was lucky to get my apartment, so I didn't complain. Allen and Fred were two friends that worked for Anne and Elvin. When hard times came just before the war, Allen and Fred took me on a train, leaving Anne and Elvin behind. I was ten years old and had never been on a train before. Huge, black, and steaming hot, I imagined it to be a fire breathing dragon as steam came from every vent, and its call was like the shrieking of a hawk diving for its food. I kept

my face to the window during the entire ride except to eat some biscuits Anne and Elvin had given us. It was in the spring, and I saw plenty of shiny shorn sheep grazing in the fields. I noticed that the few horses and cattle I saw were drawn and skinny. The land had that over-grazed look. There was more dirt than grass, and the grass was brown and dried up. I saw a lot of desert shrubs and cactus. The green fields I remembered of Anne and Elvin's farm had only been a dream.

Allen and Fred knew a friend in the city. That's where they had come from. They were sure we could room with him or one of his friends until we could find a place of our own. His name was Charles, they said.

Throughsome was no big city as I had thought, only one shanty built on top of another until it looked like towers sticking up out of the rubble. Reddish brown in color, they were catacombed with tunnels, stairways, and ladders. They didn't have room for me, but Charlie knew someone under the hill who might. Truth was, he didn't want any kid around when the girls came over. He let me stay that night, but I didn't get much sleep with the girls, the drinking, carrying on, and the band playing so loud. The girls complained when they saw a child at their party. As it turned out, I stayed there several days with a party every night.

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When the arrangements were made, I was introduced to Mr. Underhill and his people. I thought it quite odd to build your home out of tubes and pipes. It was there that I met Gretchen. It was her family that said I could live in the hole. Nobody else wanted it.

I went down and down on a metal ladder with round wooden rungs while surrounded by an acrid smell of machine oil. I saw entrances to other apartments as I descended as well as

tunnels to nowhere ... no place that I could see, anyway. When I thought I would suffocate I saw a little hole with light coming from it. I said to myself *that must be it*. I felt a little breeze flowing up through the hole. That was reassuring. I went down into a round metal bulge. I was glad to see a bright light coming through an open porthole. After my eyes adjusted, I could see the brown wooden towers across the way. I hadn't noticed a small kitten on the floor, meowing when I first entered. After a minute or so, without thinking, I picked the poor thing up. I thought the porthole was at ground zero, as I could reach out and touch the grass growing on the hill side. I guessed the kitten had fallen through there. I returned the kitten to the floor, sat at a desk under the porthole and stared at the wooden towers.

Mother Underhill yelled down the hole, "You come up and dinner with us! Couple of hours. Follow yer nose."

Her voice bounced around the metal bulkheads in one ear and out the other. I did not answer. There were a lot of littler noises bouncing around also. Only one was familiar. It went "meow, meow." I looked down and saw its source climbing up my pants leg.

"Meow!" I exclaimed. It looked just like the cat I had loved at Anne and Elvin's, the one that got run over. It had been a good mouser. It was black with white spots or white with black spots. I never could tell. And it didn't have a tail. It was a Manx. It was a good jumper and would jump from the floor right onto my shoulder and perch there. I wondered if this little one would turn out that way. I thought that it might be the same cat, just reincarnated.

I took the little creature up into my arms and stroked its furry coat. It cried without stopping, so I knew it was hungry. I pulled out a biscuit from my coat pocket and let the kitten sniff it. I took a bite and chewed it until it was soft and spit it into the sink. Placing little Meow

in there, it gobbled it up. I took another bite, chewed it, spit it in the sink, and kept doing that until the kitten became disinterested. I ate the last bite myself. Meow tried to climb out. I caught him and held him in my arms. He was purring. I had done the right thing.

I put Meow on the bunk and crawled up after it, not using the ladder. There was an old olive green army blanket on the bunk. We both curled up into its folds and went to sleep.

* * *

I was awakened by a little girl's voice calling me to dinner. I opened my eyes to see hers peering up at me from the edge of the bunk.

"You forgot, didn't ya," she laughed. "You'll go hungry around here if you forget!"

I left Meow and started up that fearful passage after her. I looked up at her legs and bottom swaying back and forth. She disappeared through a side tunnel.

It was true what Mother Underhill had said. I could follow my nose to the food. The smell of fried chicken wafted down the hole to my nostrils. That helped me forget some the tightness I felt around me. I found the tunnel that the girl had entered. She was waiting at the other end of it. She looked at me and went through the door.

I soon found they called her Gretchen. A head shorter than me, she seemed to be my age, but talked like a grown-up. The tunnel was just her size. She could run through it without bonking her head. Not me, I had to duck. I imagined that her parents were the shape of apes, walking with their knuckles pressed against the floor.

The door opened into a large room that proved to be a kitchen. There was a long wooden table surrounded by about twelve men. The white enameled stove and sink were situated opposite the table. There seemed to be a pantry door open next to the entrance and another

tunnel on the far end.

I was overpowered by the aroma of the chicken, black pepper gravy, and biscuits.

"Come on in!" cried Gretchen's mother.

Gretchen caught me by the arm and took me to the far end of the table to an empty chair. There was a plate already filled with a leg and thigh, rice and gravy, green beans and two thick biscuits waiting for me. It was still hot. As I sat in my high backed wooden chair, I noticed a glass of buttermilk sitting in front of me. They must have known I grew up on a farm. I loved buttermilk!

Gretchen sat across from me. She ate staring at me. Whenever I looked at her, she smiled, and I blushed.

Gretchen's mother, round and buxom, talked loud and laughed a lot. She wanted me to eat a second helping of everything and told me I would die of starvation when I refused. Her husband had a big red nose and red cheeks with slick black hair on his round balding head. I learned from listening to conversation that he dyed his hair and that he was red from working near the blast furnaces at the factory, and everyone called him Cherry or Derry. I couldn't tell because of their accent. I wound up calling him Cherry or Father Cherry.

The thinner man sitting beside Cherry was Gretchen's older brother. His hair was black and slicked back. He had a thin mustache across his upper lip. He was always jerking his head and pulling his hair or scratching the back of his neck. His name was Dan, and I was told by Gretchen that he was sent back from the war to work in the factory. Always joking and laughing with the others, I could tell there was a scar in his mind, a faraway look in his eyes, as though he wasn't all there, but he could keep up a conversation.

By the time I finished eating, there were only a couple of men sitting at the table drinking their coffee and talking about the war. The older one addressed Gretchen's mother as Skirmish. While clearing the table, she said, "You've already met my little Gretchen, I see." That's how I learned Gretchen's name.

When Gretchen saw me take my last bite, she got down and raced around the table, grabbed my arm, pulled me off the chair, and we were off exploring all the passageways under the hill. I could hear the echoing voice of Mother Underhill calling, "You children don't be late! And don't get lost!"

We went from tunnel to tunnel seeing all the gas lines and water lines overhead and underfoot and all the bedrooms and kitchens of other families and saying "Hi" to everyone. There was never what you might call a parlor, for the kitchens were where everyone met for conversation. If people weren't working at the factory, Gretchen told me, they were eating or sleeping.

She had to show me her bedroom. It wasn't spherical like mine, but a little cubicle with no windows or port holes. It had a wooden closet with a full length mirror on the door. She took off her skirt and modeled all the different skirts she had, prancing in front of the mirror. I sat on her bed watching. It was thicker and softer than mine, but she was a girl and should have soft things. I wasn't jealous because I wasn't used to luxury. She wound up wearing a short fluted red skirt.

* * *

I remember that pug nose of hers, all turned up, and obviously left over from babyhood, and her smile showing her two big front teeth. She smiled to one side, showing dimples. Her

thick kinky blonde hair made me wonder if she might be interracial, but I didn't believe it. Her skin was as white as her mother's baking flour. Of course, I read somewhere that some Celtic peoples had coarse hair. Maybe she had Celtic blood in her.

After the beauty parade, we took more tunnels and wound up, to my surprise, across the street and came out next to the tall wooden towers. They were right on top of us as we peered out the metal door.

Now something happened that was completely unexpected; it never even arrived near the borders of consciousness. I should have expected something like this. As we we descended the ladder, Gretchen fell, screaming, falling on top of me. It almost threw me off the ladder, but I held on, wrenching my left shoulder. I grabbed her around the waist with my left arm and she planted a big kiss right on my mouth, squeezing me tightly with her arms and legs. I wanted to yell out "Ugh!" but I was polite and didn't. I just carried her down, setting her on her feet softly.

As I carried her back up the ladder to the tunnel, something struck my funny bone. I thought I was going insane. I began running down the tunnel, laughing my fool head off. She must have followed me, for we both wound up at her place. I looked at her again and ran back down to my place still laughing. I didn't understand what had come over me. I climbed onto my bunk and giggled myself to sleep.

* * *

The next time I saw her she seemed shy, like she had changed personalities. She was on the opposite side of the table not looking at me. I gave her a good morning, but she only looked up at me with moon shaped crescents, dreamy like, and then back to her plate. I was completely perplexed and bewildered.

I ate biscuits and gravy and drank buttermilk in silence. Sausage was put onto my plate and I ate that too in silence.

Gretchen got through with her breakfast and left the table. She walked over towards the door to the bedrooms and stopped. She stood there and pouted.

Mother Underhill asked, "What did you two do last night? She's got her feelings hurt pretty bad."

"I dunno," I said, and shrugged my shoulders.

As I got off my chair to leave, the giggles came back, and I couldn't stop them. I felt quite light-headed and giddy. Gretchen stomped out of the room and slammed the door behind her. The wheel that locked the door down seemed to turn all by itself.

Mother Underhill started giggling also and said, "Oh, is that it?"

I looked at her and turned red and ran out.

* * *

Gretchen didn't talk to me for a couple of weeks and I was dearly enamored of her. In the meantime, I found that I had to work for a living, but I was used to that. I had worked at Anne and Elvin's since I was out of diapers. Dan and Cherry introduced me to the factory. The day they took me, they gave me a pail with biscuit sandwiches in it. When we got up to the gate of the factory, which was made out of hurricane fence, we waited in line. The guy at the gate yelled out "thirty two!" and let in thirty two men. There were growls from the men left outside the gate, and the guard at the gate growled at Dan, wanting to know what he was going to do with his pet dog, meaning me. He told him he needed some help cleaning up down in the hold. He gave Dan a coin which he pinned to my chest. It had a number on front and a sharp hook on

the back. I noticed Dan and Cherry and the other men picking up similar coins from a board just beyond the guardhouse which they pinned to their own shirts.

I was pretty strong and tall for my age and knew what work was. I didn't mind the work. Putting heavy loads on my back strengthened me. My mind though, was upon an eight year old girl that seemed to be disturbed at me. After a couple of weeks I figured it out that I had embarrassed her on that ladder to my bedroom. I was so sorry, and all I could get out of her at meal times was a shy glance. Even though I was carrying metal shards and clumps and sweeping floors at the factory, all I could think of was her.

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It was in the evening after dinner when I was retiring for the night when Gretchen spoke to me again. I had tried for several nights apologizing to her without any success, and here she was, following me down into my hole. She sat cross legged on the now carpeted floor with the crimson light of a Summer night shining onto her face. She sat there petting almost grown Meow. I looked down at her from my bunk, very excited about her presence in my room. I wanted to run and laugh still, but I held it inside. I only smiled. She was a light that made me forget that I was in such a deep hole with a mountain pressing down on me.

I don't remember exactly what we talked about, but I can bet it was about that day when she fell into my arms. I remember talking about my work at the factory and her saying, "Bo-ring, bo-ring." I have a feeling she was telling me how boring her life was. I will never forget that we wound up in my bunk in each other's arms, she apologizing to me, and me apologizing to her and falling asleep holding each other. We slept that way all night until the dawn.

* * *

We became fast pals. Gretchen became the family I never had, and she showed me a love I never had known but had always wished for. I had seen other girls at the farm, but no one had struck me the way Gretchen did. The term “Girl friend” had never entered my mind. She was more like a kissing cousin, little niece, and sometimes a sister. She didn’t live long enough to become anything closer.

Chapter Two

Leaving the Farm

Anne and Elvin acted more like caretakers, never friends. I imagined that family members were friends, and Gretchen was my fast friend, fast by my side at all times in my early years.

I think I must have yearned for Anne and Elvin, though. I dreamed of them nearly every night. I tried to make them the family they never were. I dreamed of them taking care of me, with loving, smiling faces. The yearnings of all those years unfolded within my dreams, but the dreams faded as Gretchen's love and friendship filled my life.

I remember a tall three-story farm house. It was three times as long as it was wide and covered with large white square shingles. Chimneys buttressed each end. A third chimney poked its belching mouth up in the middle of the steep roof waiting for a stork that never came. Like the chimneys, the roof was painted brick red, but made of shakes. There was a middle door stolen from some colonial style home. It had steps going up to it with a small foot porch, nothing fancy. I imagined that through the door stairs climbed to the master bedrooms.

In my dreams I would ascend the stairs that led to the dorms on the third floor on the right side of the house.

The dorms only went as far as the middle chimney which worked along with the chimney near the door to kept us warm. The third chimney remained a mystery unless it was attached to the stove in the kitchen.

I would walk the dormitory down the central carpet that lay between the two chimneys with bunk-beds on each side. I would end up by the central fireplace where there were shower rooms on each side. It made the shower rooms hot and steamy in the winter as well as plenty of heat for the bunks.

Elvin was a mechanical genius. He made the chimney so it would heat up a couple of hot-water tanks on each side to supply the showers. Tubes of water held the burning logs. This made it so that in the summer we had to take cold showers because there was no heat. There was one exception. The summer we left, it got so hot outside that even the cold water ran warm. That was when the bad times and the drought came.

I walked through the back door into a small anteroom where I left my coat and shoes, then entered the kitchen to the right. It had a large black cast-iron stove in the fireplace. In ancient times, it had been a brick oven. So Elvin had combined the stove and brick oven so the stove lay on top.

I would sit at the long picnic table covered by a white table cloth. The men sat there between the walk-in pantry and the big stove/fireplace, talking, eating, and drinking tea.

The kitchen always smelled of tea, tobacco and bread.

There were two maids for the kitchen alone. They lived in the basement, but I never saw them leave it.

I think Anne bought all the groceries, making sure the pantry was replenished regularly.

I strolled behind the home to a red barn with its arched roof. There I milked the cows and fed the riding horses and those kept for the wagon and buggy.

I crossed the street to the co-op with its barn and huge grain towers. I always imagined

them to be a castle with knights in shining armor. I strolled around back to see the railway where all the grain and hay was shipped out.

I dreamed of that dark bleak day when the train came. Anne and Elvin were standing together at the kitchen door as I came in from the field. They told me to go upstairs and get all my things, handing me a carpet bag to put them in. I went up and emptied my drawer into the carpet bag and then rolled up my bedding and slung it onto my shoulder. When I came down, they gave me a bag of biscuits and told me to take them out front where Allen and Fred were waiting. They didn't say goodbye, so I thought it was just another chore they were sending me on, albeit a long one. Spending nights out on the range with a bag of biscuit sandwiches or corn fritters had become a regular occurrence in my life. We would always be out several days at a time repairing fences or cleaning up after someone else. I thought nothing of it.

We usually went out back and hitched up Bessy and Sam to the wagon and headed out to wherever. We never met out front. I thought that was strange, but I didn't question them about it. I just went and did what I was told. That's the way it had always been since I was about three years old. I had started by sweeping the kitchen floor, raking out the barn, and feeding the chickens. When I got older, I found that I could lift boards and limbs of trees and help clear the ground where someone had been working. I hauled everything on my back and became a regular workhorse. I was later given charge over pigs and cows. I watered down the pigs and led the cows in to be milked. What I loved best was watching the sheep. So when they sent me out with Allen and Fred, I didn't think anything of it, except that I had never before been required to gather *all* my things, and when I saw the tall guys going off in the wrong direction, I had to ask.

"Where we going?" I called as I ran to catch up.

Allen said, "We catch the train this time."

That train lit the darkening sky. I had never been on a passenger train before, only those creepers that moved the grain cars around. I would see them pulling the grain cars to town. Sometimes there would be grain cars out back of the co-op and the next day, they had mysteriously disappeared. When going to the co-op to buy vegetable or flower seed every year or sometimes to bring back live plants like tomatoes, we were never allowed out back where the train track was. We even went along the tracks on the wagon for miles and never saw a train, though I would hear them scream in the middle of the night as they passed by in the dark when I was bedded down.

I dreamed of storm clouds covering the sky. Lightning streaked across followed by rolling thunder as there had been the previous nights, but it was a dry storm. There was never any water. Allen said that the lightning was caused by the dust being carried along. Anne and Elvin had told us the previous night not to shower because the water was low. We had to save what little we had for drinking. But that was nothing. I had gone many days without a shower. Now the thought of that was making me thirsty, so I looked at what Allen and Fred were carrying. I saw no water bag. We had always carried a water bag with us.

When I tried to hand Allen my bag of biscuits, he told me to keep them, said they had their own. That was another strange thing. We never carried our own. Someone always carried the common lunch bag and the water bag and put it on the wagon. But now we were taking the train and things were different.

We walked out around the left side of the co-op and up the ramp onto the loading dock.

There was a grain car there and one hooked on behind it. They looked like two gray metal cows with two huge tits. Fred hopped onto one, clinging onto a ladder leading up to the top. Allen grabbed me by the waist and lifted me onto the ladder as Fred ascended higher. Then Allen hopped on board. We all climbed on top and waited. I thought this was a funny way to ride a train, but there were no passenger cars where we could sit down. Allen told me to hold to the rail that was on both sides of the top. My butt fit just between the rail and the top. I held on with both hands because I felt myself sliding down the other side. Pretty soon a crawler came and hitched itself to the grain car so hard that I almost fell over backwards, but Allen caught me.

The crawler pulled us downtown and up to another building with a dock and a ramp leading down to the rails. I was told to climb down. Allen and Fred followed.

Darkness covered the sky. The air itself was black. I couldn't see anything but the cones of light shining down from the top edge of the building onto the cigar advertisement painted on the wall. It was quite blinding, so I stared out into the blackness. I heard Allen buying three tickets to Throughsome, wherever that was. I asked Allen what chore we had to do in Twosome. He said, "Nothing. And it's Throughsome, not Twosome." Fred put in his two cents and said, "We don't have a damn thing to do there!" Allen then tried to smooth things out by saying, "We're going on a little vacation. We're through working for a while."

"Must be something Anne and Elvin want us to do, huh?" I blurted out.

I was ignored. Then after a long while thinking, I thought maybe we were going to do something for the rich aunt of Anne and Elvin's in that far off city where she lived. I asked, "What does Aunt Leota want with us?"

Allen turned around and raised his voice at me. "Leave it alone!"

But Fred didn't leave it alone or me. He had to run it into my face. He came down into my face with "You don't get it, do ya little Buck! We ain't gonna do no work for Aunt Leota. We ain't gonna do no work for Anne and Elvin. We're capoot!. Through! We been fired!"

Allen grabbed him and pulled him away, saying, "Leave the kid alone."

Night put its hand around my throat and choked me until tears streamed down my cheeks. I stood out of the light so the tall guys couldn't see it. We stared out into that dark void and watched the storm's white fingernail scratches against the billowing blackness. Anne and Elvin hadn't even said "Goodbye."

I dreamed of the train as it screeched a cry of dearth and shame. My thought was, what did I do? The screech got louder and louder as the train approached. Its single headlight aimed right for my heart. It shot straight for me!

I shot up from my bunk, gasping for air. Gretchen grabbed me and pulled me back down. That eight year old held my head against her chest and caressed it, comforting me back to sleep as I held onto her for dear life.

I dreamed again of the coach we had boarded and the endless stream of land that passed by. The land was gray. The trees I saw had dark bare limbs. The sheep and cattle I saw with horses grazing on the barren wastes were skin and bone. They looked old. I saw a lot of dead cattle lying on their side with their legs sticking straight out.

My mouth and throat were dry. Allen said that the clouds were nothing but dust being blown up from the dry ground, sure sign of a drought. Fred called it a dearth. Allen said he didn't know how to talk. That disagreement led them to hitting each other against their upper arms with their fists.

Late at night, my tongue began to swell. I was in a daze. I heard Allen talk to a man, and then he handed me a cold wet can. It proved to be beer as I began to drink it down rather fast. Allen made me drink it slow, saying "Slow down, Buck. Take it easy." I heard Fred laughing his head off. I didn't mind the bitter taste. I was just glad to get something to drink. Besides, it fit with the bitterness I felt inside. After finishing the beer, I handed it back to Allen and said, "Thanks." I then put my cheek against my soft bed roll, stared into the darkness, and went to sleep.

Chapter Three

Gretchen

I woke up with my cheek pressed against Gretchen's cheek. She was awake. We kissed naturally, without thinking about it. Then I thought about it, and feeling giddy, started giggling.

"There you go again," she said mysteriously, "laughing at me," looking up out the corners of her eyes.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I can't help it." I thought a moment and continued, "I don't like girls, but you're different."

"How? Different?"

I squeezed her close. She squeezed me back.

"You're family, that's all, like a cousin, I guess."

"Is this how you treat your cousins?" she asked.

"I don't know," I answered. "Never knew any."

"Do you think I'm your cousin?" she asked. "Why did you say that?"

"I don't know. It just came to my mind," I said.

"Are we kissing cousins?" she asked.

Thereupon, we started kissing and kissing, at least, she started kissing and kissing me. She asked me if I loved her and I said yes. We wound up just holding each other and breathing into each other's nostrils. We fell asleep for awhile and I woke up alone. I felt really empty without her and sad all day at work. All I could think of was her. What age was I? Only ten or

eleven then?

There came a day when Gretchen introduced me to an uncle of hers, Uncle Gruber, who lived at the far end of the hill, opposite from my hole. He was white haired, had a short white beard, mostly looking like he forgot to shave for a week, wore wire-rimmed spectacles and a red silk bath robe over his white shirt and black bow tie. He showed us something I had never seen before. Above his apartment was another bathysphere, but the upper half was a bubble of glass. He said that it provided the maximum protection from the pressure under the ocean. But now that the ocean had dried up, he was using it as an apartment. Inside the glass dome was a most interesting tube he called a telescope. We could look into it and see the stars, he said. He invited us to come back after midnight, and he would show us some sights.

That night there were no clouds, and the Milky Way spread over the black sky like a bed of diamonds. Whenever I was out with Allen and Fred, especially those times I had to stay up and watch the sheep, I would look at that dazzling spectacle in awe and wonder. I would never tire of it. Here in the city it wasn't so grand, but grand enough to still turn the mind to wonder and ponder the mysteries of the universe.

After being shown the planets and moons and nebulae by Uncle Gruber, having our souls filled to the brim, we settled down onto a red leather couch that encircled the telescope where we could lie down and lean against the cylindrical wall. Our conversation turned to the time I arrived in Throughsome.

"And you stayed in those awful shacks?" she asked.

"I call them towers. They're reaching for the stars," I said.

"Just like the Tower of Babel they speak about in Sunday School," she reminded me.

"Just as shaky, too. And the people that live in them are just like their towers."

"Yeah, but they have fun."

"Don't you have fun, Buck?" she asked, taking hold of my hand.

"Yes. I used to have fun on the farm. Then, I was out in the open, but I have fun when I'm with you. I don't get so scared when you're around. But I go zonkers when you're around."

"Mama says those girls over there are loose girls like there's something loose about them. Am I a loose girl? I'm always dropping things."

"No, Gretchen, you're not a loose girl."

"Would you rather be with one of those loose girls over there?"

We were both laying on our stomachs facing each other. I turned my head, trying to look up at the stars. I somehow felt threatened by her question. I said "No!" rather loudly.

"Tell me what it's like over there in those towers of yours," she said touching her hand to my lips. "What's it like living with *those* people?"

"*Those* people are my friends. Allen and Fred have *always* been my friends. They've *always* been at Anne and Elvin's, and we've *always* worked together. They took care of me. We shared our food and blankets. Allen let me sleep with him out on the range, and even at home, up in the bunks, whenever I had bad dreams, he didn't mind me slipping under his covers and sleeping with him. We would always sing together when we worked. I don't know why he got so upset at me when we left. I guess he was just as hurt as I was.

"When we arrived, I saw this huge factory pass by that looked like a giant steam ship at sea with smoke stacks with all that black smoke coming out of them at the tops. There were also smaller stacks like torches with fire shooting out of them. I could feel the heat. It was like it was

floating above the train tracks. I could see a lot of trains full of coal or steel going up and down the yard. There were men yelling and men singing, and steam whistles blowing, and I thought it was just lovely the way they were working all together.

"Then I saw those tall wooden towers, dozens of them all crowded together. They looked splendid with the red light of the morning shining on them. We passed them and came up to another loading dock. It was then that I took notice of the doors of the train. They were on the side and not on the ends as I had imagined. They opened all by themselves.

"'We got a little walk, Buckaroo.' That's what Allen said. 'We will see if old Charlie is still around.'

"'Who's Charlie?' I asked.

"'It was some guy I used to know when I was a kid ... used to work at Anne and Elvin's but got fired a long time ago.

"Fred said that Charlie had sex with his mother and they both laughed. I didn't think that was funny, do you?"

"No," Gretchen said, screwing her nose up.

"It took me a few days before I discovered what they were talking about. They didn't really mean it, it was just something they called each other."

"Oh, yeah, that thing."

"Walking all that way, my bedroll and carpet bag got really heavy. I guess I didn't want to carry them. I was used to carrying heavy loads. I felt sick inside, like there was a big emptiness. Anne and Elvin were like rotten meat balls in my stomach. Have you had rotten meat balls before?"

"No."

"It makes you want to throw up."

"Oh."

"But the farther along the road we went, I felt free for some reason. I wanted to throw down my bag and bedroll and run and play. Either way, they were too heavy to carry.

"I was used to walking miles carrying a bedroll, but I had to carry that darn bag too. Anyway, we arrived at those wooden towers. I could see up close that they were patched together with wood and metal roofing, you know, the type that goes like waves on a pond."

"Corrugated," she instructed me. "Uncle Gruber told me."

"And then I had to climb all the way up one of those towers to Charlie's place! I just threw down my bag and groaned. Allen had pity on me. He took my pants belt off and used it to attach my bag to my bedroll and said 'Climb!' and there I was, carrying that heavy load up those stairs.

"When we got to Charlie's place, I was so tired that I just plopped down in the corner on my bedroll and went to sleep. The last thing I heard was 'What's with the kid!' but it didn't bother me. I felt like I was still moving, still on the train, still feeling that bump, bump, bump, over the rails."

Gretchen giggled and repeated the bump, bump, bump, several times.

"I guess I really didn't sleep well enough on the train.

"I woke up to the smell of bar-b-que and the sound of strange music that made me want to dance. There was a band, and the place was filled with men and women dancing and eating at little tables scattered around. I later found out what a bar is. Allen brought me a plate of ribs and

a bottle of beer and asked, 'You want to eat?' He put it on a table near me, and I got up and sat at the table. He put the food and bottle on it, and I ate and drank until I was quite full. I belched really loud, but nobody noticed.

"Some woman wanted to give me some whiskey. I told her I wasn't thirsty anymore and she laughed. I could see all her body parts the way she bent over. She had big red lips and wore a red dress that sparkled. She laughed all the way back across the room.

"It was like that every night. I couldn't believe they had a party every night.

"After the dancing and the music was over, I had to sneak into my corner to get away from all the smooching and groaning. It made me afraid. I'm glad they got tired of me. I surely got tired of them. I didn't mind cleaning up the bar every day. That was easy stuff after having lived on the farm all my life.

"I was only there about a week though when I heard Charlie and Allen and Fred arguing. 'Yeah, yeah!' I heard. 'The ladies don't like him here!' and 'He's like our little brother. We don't kick out our little brother.' and 'He'll be just across the way. That's not far. I know the guy. He's okay. Works at the factory.'

"Next morning, here I was."

"You like it here, don't you Buck?" She rose up on her elbows and knees, still holding my hands.

"I like it here with you," I said.

Chapter Four

Memories of Gretchen

Gretchen's Uncle Gruber was a doctor. I thought she meant someone who cares for the sick, but she explained that it meant that he taught at the university. Since it had been bombed out, he now taught mathematics at the local high school for all ages.

I wondered about going to school. I had never been to school. Gretchen went to school, and she could read and write and figure. I had to work for a living, but I could draw and play a flute; though I had stopped, not being out in the country any more. It was funny that I never got paid for working. I asked Daddy Cherry one time. He told me that I was Dan's charge. They didn't pay the charges. They were just there to learn. Dan was responsible for me, to feed and clothe me and give me a bed, not the company. Dan knew Charlie, and it was Dan's little hole he had built for himself that I was living in. It was too close to the surface for most underhillers. Even though it was deep down inside the hill, it was poking out of the side of the hill, and no underhiller would think that proper planning or something. Dan said it was just too far up for him, meaning, too close to the surface, but it was too far down for me. It was my place, though. He stayed at home in the bedroom he grew up in.

I supposed that I would always work for a living, but Gretchen had other plans. That's why she introduced me to her Uncle Gruber. He would teach me to read and write and figure. Then I could get a paying job and get my own place.

If I could read and write, I thought, I could become a foreman someday instead of a lowly

laborer, but she had those big plans that girls have for guys. I found out pretty soon that women have big ambitions.

* * *

We were getting tired lying down, and I thought it about time we left, so I sat up and she sat up and scooted over by me.

"Daddy Cherry used to be a low-life when he first started out," she said, "Mother introduced him to her brother, Uncle Gruber. He taught him to read and write and figure the books, so now he's a secretary or something. That's why he's so fat. He sits at a desk all day doing the books."

"You want me to be fat and old?" I teased.

She poked her finger into my stomach and said, "I'll never see any fat on you Buckaroo!"

We laughed. I laughed mainly because she touched me.

Gretchen's skin was soft like a baby. I loved holding her. I put my arm around her then, and she cuddled close. I was thrilled being near her. I had asked her mother one time why her skin was so soft. She told me that she hadn't lost her babyfat yet. It was just a matter-of-fact thing with her. It was a lovely thing to me.

Gretchen was funny. She was always telling me jokes she heard from her uncle. She told me of a Sufi master who heard another Sufi's chanting coming from a nearby island off shore. The Sufi master would walk along the beach each day to meditate, but would be disturbed by the other Sufi chanting. It wasn't really the sound of the chanting that disturbed him. It was the *way* the other Sufi was chanting. One day the irritation became so great that the Sufi master got in a boat and rowed out to the island to correct the other Sufi. He found a small skinny man in a

little hut chanting away. He said to him, "Excuse me, but this is the way it goes," and showed the grateful Sufi the right chant. He then got into his boat and started rowing back. When he got half way between the island and the shore, here came the Sufi, splish splash, splish splash, running across the water, huffing and puffing, to ask the Sufi master, "Now how did that chant go again?" Gretchen laughed her head off.

She was so sweet. She would crawl over to me and sit on my lap laughing and hold my arm, spilling her tears onto my shirt. As I held her, my heart would fill up, and the clean smell of her freshly washed hair and body would fill me up a little more. I would put my nose down on her head and breathe deeply until I just overflowed. She would often tell me that I was glowing. We wouldn't talk at those times, just hold each other and feel the beat of each other's hearts.

* * *

There is no more Gretchen now. There have been times when I soaked my pillow at night remembering her, holding my pillow instead of her. I dream of her often. After dinner, I would stick around and talk with Mother Underhill about Gretchen. She would say, "She was the strangest little baby. She was jabbering the moment she came out of the womb. She was always talking. I had to sit with her for hours while she sat on the potty, and we would talk. She trained herself, you know. She saw her mama sit on the potty, so she had to sit on the potty. It was the same with cooking. She saw her mama make biscuits, so she had to make biscuits. You should'a seen her. She was all covered with flour from head to toe. She saw me puttin' on hand lotion, so she had to put on hand lotion. You should'a seen her! stripped naked, standin' there on the kitchen table. She had buttered herself all over. She was as slick as a greased pig, and I

couldn't take hold o' her no way to pick her up and wash her off."

I would watch her wipe her tears with her apron as she talked.

She would tell me about Gretchen's insatiable curiosity.

"She was climbing twenty-five-foot ladders when she was one years old. She knew the tunnels by the time she was three. She knew all the underhill folk. She had to go each day to say 'Hi' to each one. Nobody would go with her. We know everybody down here. They all go to church. She was safe. She was always safe. And now this..."

* * *

After I got to know Gretchen (it was about three weeks after I had started working), she had to show me a surprise. There was a playground inside the hill in which tubes wound around in spirals or went down at an angle like slides. The walls of the tubes were completely smooth. We joined other kids climbing in and out, sliding down, and rolling around, and there was a maze of Jungle Jim bars filling the room, so you could spend hours climbing. Mother Underhill told me that she had taken one year old Gretchen in there and she had just laughed and giggled all the way through, and she would do it again and again all by herself.

In the couple of years that I knew Gretchen, she showed me all the underhill passageways, introduced me to all the families, and showed me rooms full of machinery and the men that took care of them. It was the machinery that gave the underhillers lights, gas and water, air conditioning and heating. They all knew her from when she was a toddler. I was so amazed that she knew so many people. But there was only one really close friend, and that was her Uncle Gruber.

"Those two," said Mother Underhill, "were like two wings on a bird. You know, it was he

who taught our daughter to read and write, and she learned so young. She had such a thirst for knowing things. She could name all the stars and planets and tell you where they were at night. Other little girls play with their dolls, but it wasn't so with our little Gretchen. No, she had to play the quiz game and rack everybody's brains, asking questions about everything. That's why she so loved her Uncle Gruber. He could answer her questions. She would stroll over to his place just as you please, like it was nothing and never get lost. She could always find her way back. Her sense of direction was uncanny. We lost her one time at a church revival. I was worried half sick. But when we got home, there she was, waitin' for us on top of the hill. I didn't have to worry about her. She had the angels watching over her if it weren't the neighbors. And we have such nice neighbors. When she was in diapers, she would wander off, and there would always be someone to open the doors for her, or someone to bring her home. But when she potty trained herself, that was the end of someone bringing her home. She had to do it herself!"

* * *

Uncle Gruber lived alone. I guess he never got married. Whenever I asked him if he had ever fallen in love, he would begin by talking about his early days at the University and then trail off into mumbles. He would then grab Gretchen and claim that she was his family. At the time I met him, he was teaching her geometry, showing her models of different types of geodesic systems that could undulate and interconnect with each other. She would take them down off the shelf or from where they were hanging from the ceiling and show me how they worked. She would also show me models of molecules and show me how they related to geometry. They were like pop beads she could pull apart and pop them back together and get me to do the same. And then there was the telescope. She would show me all the stars and

nebulas she knew and all the twelve planets. She told me how Uncle Gruber's telescope was built on the principles of electrons and magnetism, that it wasn't your ordinary optical system. She knew much too much for a child her age.

* * *

After her death, I went back to Uncle Gruber for lessons, and he would want to know where Gretchen was. Not wanting to bring up her death, I would tell him that I didn't know, and he would start telling me about when she was little. "She would surprise me, certainly," he would start off. "She used to make a humming sound and put her lips to my throat or I would be humming a tune, and she would ask 'What is that?' and hum the same tune against my throat and ask that silly question. Then one day it dawned on me that she was asking about vibration. So I got some tuning forks and proceeded to give her a physics lesson. She gobbled it up! She just gobbled it up! Just barely out of diapers.

"One day she came to me and asked me what was one, two, three, four, five, and so on. So I started teaching her numbers. She understood Pano's Theorem, about adding one to a number, ad infinitum. Imagine that! No one taught her. She didn't want arithmetic. She wanted number theory. She took the apples I had used to teach her about addition and subtraction and piled them into a tetrahedron and asked 'What number is that?' I was so thrilled at having a little genius to teach.

"She would come in with matrices of magic numbers that would add up in only certain patterns. She was always investigating all the beautiful patterns she could come up with. We got into the higher dimensions of space and time, but whenever we would talk about higher dimensions, she would bring up the subject of God and the angels and talk about them as if she

knew them personally. She would dance when she talked of God and say 'This is how he dances.'

"She would tell me there was a mother in heaven as well as a father and that they were continually having children and putting them down on all the planets of the universe. I would ask her how she knew this. She would say that the ancient books talked about it. She was reading the ancient books when I wasn't looking."

Chapter Five

Gretchen's Angel and The Resurrection

One day I came home morose. I had seen something very sad. At Anne and Elvin's I had seen cattle slaughtered along with an occasional hog, and I had seen carcasses of dead animals, like a cow or a dog, or even a buck or two during deer season, but to see a man die was another thing. I had never been to a funeral.

After dinner that day, Gretchen asked me, "Why are you so sad today, Buck?"

I didn't want to talk about it. My feelings on the subject were so untested. Then, she kept peering up at me into my face and tilting her head from side to side. I couldn't help being cheered up just enough to talk.

"Okay," I grunted. "I saw a person get killed today."

"What happened?" she asked, touching my hand with her baby soft face, working it up along my arm, kissing it, trying to comfort me.

"I was cleaning up around a rock crusher. There was a man there too, cleaning the inside or trying to fix it. I wasn't paying attention. All of a sudden the machine turned on. It caught his arm. I tried to find the stop button, but it must have been on the other side. There was a lot of yelling and men scrambling about, but nothing was done, and the man was pulled into the grinder. It was a bloody mess."

I started wondering then about life and death. I felt very moody. I wasn't necessarily talking to Gretchen, I just said, "What do we live for if we just have to face death at the end?"

And a lot of people die young. Why do we have to die? What happens to us? Just more fertilizer for the ground."

"That's simple, Silly," she said matter-of-factly. "We're not from here. We only come to this place for a visit. Don't you ever want to go home?"

That statement was so far out that it just hit me and bounced off.

I asked again, "What's the good of this life if we just have to die?"

"How do you expect to get back home, Silly?" was her reply.

The sound of home was appealing to me, so I said, "This is my home here with you, and this is where I want to stay. I don't want to have to leave you or your mom and dad or my friends Allen and Fred. Did you know they have a job now at the factory?"

"Buck," she said, exasperated that I tried to change the subject. "None of this is going to last. We're here for a time to get what we need and then we're out of here. Even I won't stay for long."

What a prophecy that turned out to be. I didn't think she knew what she was talking about, but since I had no other beliefs except for a nebulous god out there somewhere in the nightly heavens, she filled a hole in me. Her beliefs settled into my heart along with the love I felt for her. So what she said became very familiar to me as if I had believed it all my life. I didn't expect that she would go really soon. I thought she meant that she would live perhaps until she was sixty years old instead of until she was ninety years old.

Gretchen described what home was like. She said, "There is a father and a mother and all our brothers and sisters. We go to school when we are old enough, and guess who our teachers are? Father and Mother. There is also Big Brother and other older brothers and sisters there to

teach us what they know. But one day everybody finished school and we had to have a test. And guess where the test was? Everyone had to come down here. We all leave home. That's what we're doing here on Earth ... to see how much we can remember of what we learned. But we also can learn new things because we've never had a body before."

"I don't understand," I said. "What do you mean we've never had a body before? That's strange talk."

"Silly Buckaroo!" she said kindly and a little bit loud. "We were born to Father and Mother; we were spirit babies. We went to school and then it was time to come down here. I came into my mommy's tummy and you went into your mommy. That's how we got here. And when it's time to go home, we just step out of our body and go home. That's what the angel told me. He said for me not to be afraid."

"An angel talked to you?" I asked, bewildered.

She just smiled a big smile and beamed and continued with, "So you see? That man you saw today is okay." She rubbed my arm up and down to soothe me.

"You mean that he just went home?" I asked, getting inspired.

"Yes. He just went back home to Father and Mother in a great white house where everything is white and shiny."

White and shiny, I thought. I had had enough of that kind of talk. I could take only so much of it. I guess I didn't feel good enough to be discussing that kind of subject.

* * *

The subject of death came up again another time underneath the spread of the Milky Way Galaxy. We were outside, lying on top of the hill, looking at the stars. A thought came to me. I

spoke it out loud, not directing it to Gretchen, more to the stars that inspired the thought.

"Wouldn't it be nice if we could just keep our bodies?" I asked wistfully.

"Of course," she said. "We get our bodies back." The stars twinkled in her black eyes.

"We get them back, huh?" I asked. I don't know why, but the thought hurt. I couldn't help thinking about that guy that got killed the other day. I thought of all the loved ones people lose because of death. I even thought of losing Gretchen and her parents and of others I thought of as my friends.

"After they go through the repair shop," she added.

I couldn't deny her buoyant smile and the radiance of her eyes. My moroseness, which I had had for days, couldn't hold her down, and her beaming face made the fortress around my heart crumble. I had to believe what she believed because I loved her so.

In an enlightened moment, I said, "The repair shop. You mean the grave?"

"You're never there," she said. "You're in Heaven and your body stays in the earth for a while."

"And just when are you supposed to get it back?"

"It's called the Resurrection."

"And just when is that?" I asked.

"Oh, at the end. When everybody's through."

* * *

"She called it the Resurrection," said Uncle Gruber, one night. I had come to visit him again to use his telescope. I thought it might give me a lift. I had fallen into a slump. "She said there had to be a sacrifice, and that our Big Brother was it. That he showed us the way by being

the first to be resurrected. She said that he conquered death for all of us, and that it was through believing in him that he had the power to raise us from the grave. Gretchen didn't speak of the Christ per se. She called him Big Brother. She told me about the glorious light she had seen..."

"And the angel," I added.

"And the angel," Uncle Gruber repeated. He looked up at the stars. I could see them reflected in his eyes as I had seen them in the eyes of Gretchen. "She confided in me, and this isn't something to be published, that she sat on his lap one night when she was little and lost. He comforted her."

"The angel?" I asked.

"No," Uncle Gruber said. "The Christ."

I gulped in air to keep from weeping.

"And was she found?" I asked.

"She came home on her own and sat on the hill until everyone else came home from looking for her." He sighed, "She was the angel."

Remembering all this, I had hope that I could once again hold Gretchen in my arms.

Chapter Six

Gretchen's Sickness

The first time I saw Gretchen drop a glass of milk from her hands I thought her mother was going to spank her good, but it never happened, and Gretchen only laughed, looked away, and said, "I don't understand why I do that."

Her mother said, "Stand still and I'll sweep it up. Can't get glass in your toesees." Gretchen was in her bare feet at the time.

Because Gretchen laughed, I laughed too, as if we were connected with strings and I was her marionette. Everything she did I had to do, at least on an emotional level. I never dropped anything, and I thought she was awfully clumsy. I laughed out, "You clumsy girl!"

Her mother replied for her. "She's clumsy, that way, she is. Can't hold onto anything. Always losing something. She'll lose her head one of these days."

"I already have lost my head, Mamma," she said, winking at me.

As soon as the glass splinters were off the floor, she scampered over to my chair and sat in my lap and held me tight. "On account of I can't let go of him," she said. She was ten years old then, and I was twelve.

I am reminded now that when we first met she had fallen from a ladder into my arms. I thought at the time that she was playing. Now I know she let go because she couldn't help it. I also understand why she got me to carry her typewriter all the way across to her uncle's one night. She had taken me by the arm and dragged me into her bedroom.

"Can you reach that typewriter up there?" she had asked, pointing to the top shelf in her closet near her bed. "Pull it down and help me carry it to Uncle Gruber's. There's some stuff in some books I've got to type up."

"I'll bet," I said, "that he'll let you borrow the books."

"Go on, get it," she said with a half grin up her cheek.

I got the heavy thing and started to let her take half of it so I would be "helping" her carry it. She wiped at the air in front of her as if she were fanning herself. The expression on her face turned desperate.

"You take it!" she said.

"I thought you wanted me to *help* you carry it. That doesn't mean for me to carry the whole thing," came out of my mouth, and I don't know if I was teasing or just being stubborn.

She left the room, and I followed after her. She turned around and shot me with a look of anger that surprised me. "Just bring it along!" she blurted out.

We went on in silence until we had gone down a couple of corridors. Then she said, "...I can't hold it!"

I had never seen her like that before. It made me feel stupid and embarrassed. I tagged along until we got there. When we arrived, we just went on in. There were no door bells to ring and we didn't knock. She said, "Put it over there," pointing to a table. "I have to do a report for school."

"Can I stay and help?" I asked, which I wouldn't normally have done except for the change of her countenance.

"No," she said bluntly.

That hurt my feelings, and I dropped the typewriter onto the table instead of placing it there gently. I said, "Fine, then!" and turned to go away.

She ran over to me, and grabbed me, burying her face in my neck.

"I'm sorry," she cried. "I don't know why I should be so upset. Don't go away mad."

I held her tight and noticed that she was starting to grow breasts already. I glanced around the room to change the thoughts springing up in my head. Then I brought my thoughts back to the situation. We had known each other for two years. I guess we had grown close enough for arguments.

* * *

The last argument we had was over a picnic basket. I was a numbskull at the time. Things didn't sink into my head very fast. I didn't think about her habit of dropping things. I guess I was just too excited about going on the picnic, expecting too much. We were in the kitchen and Mother Underhill was putting the final tidbits into the picnic basket.

"Mamma, hurry up," Gretchen said anxiously, looking at the clock. "You're being slow on purpose." There was a play practice at school she had to go to and wanted to have a picnic first, and we were running out of time. I'm sure she wanted to spend more time with me than her mother allowed.

"I'll be just a moment, Dear," she said. Mother Underhill wanted to put the napkins in just the right way.

"That's okay," I said, slipping my hands down into my jeans back pockets.

"No it's not!" Gretchen said, stamping her foot. "We have to hurry so we can spend more time at the park. I never get to be with you any more. You're always working."

It was true. I had finally been hired and was working longer hours.

"There, there," said Mother Underhill as she handed the basket to Gretchen absentmindedly. "Here you go."

"Come on, let's go," Gretchen said grabbing the basket.

When we reached the outer door, I saw Gretchen throw the basket down the hole and laugh hysterically. She ran past me into the kitchen, laughing.

I called back, "You fool! What are you doing? You're creepy!"

I ran after her to confront her, but she turned on me, beating me on the chest with her fists.

"Wait! Wait!" was all I could get out.

Mother Underhill called out, "Gretchen, Gretchen!" She grabbed Gretchen and took her out of the kitchen.

I went down the hole and gathered up what remained of the picnic, placing all the chicken and celery sticks back. I wiped the potato salad off my entry rug and picked up the shards of glass from the bowl, throwing them away. I vacuumed later. I took the picnic basket back up to the kitchen and met Mother Underhill cleaning up.

"What happened?" I asked, setting the basket onto the table. "She threw the picnic basket down the hole."

"No, Honey," she said with a soothing voice. "She only dropped it."

"What's wrong with her?" I asked. "I didn't do anything to her."

Then she confided, "Honey, she's sick. It causes her not to be able to hold on to anything. You've seen her. She's always dropping things. She can't help it."

"Well, she laughs about it," I said, not understanding. "And then she gets upset."

She sat down in a chair onto which Gretchen's coat was draped. She scooted the chair back and turned it around towards me. I pulled out a chair to lean on.

"Can I go and see her?" I asked.

"She won't see you, Honey. She's pretty embarrassed at what she does. No need to embarrass her more."

She opened the basket I had set on the table and took out some chicken, wrapped it in a napkin, and gave it to me.

"You'd better go and have yourself some lunch. I'll take care of Gretchen."

* * *

The next morning at breakfast, Gretchen wouldn't look at me. I felt like I shouldn't be there ... as though I interrupted something private among strangers. Suddenly, Gretchen threw down her fork and splattered egg everywhere. She slipped behind her mother and the man sitting next to her and ran down the corridor to the bedrooms. She was gone. Her mother got up nearly knocking the man over trying to reach her, calling "Gretchen! Gretchen!" She went over to the stove, saying to no one in particular, "Oh, let her go. She's a troubled child." She kept wiping her hands with her apron as though she was trying to wipe the blame from herself.

* * *

I found out later that Gretchen had run to her Uncle Gruber. While visiting with him after her death, he said to me, "Yes. She had come to me that day, and we sat down together, and I sang a little song we used to sing together. It was a hymn. I don't know what prompted me. I'm not a church-going man. It seemed to comfort her. She told me then, 'Uncle Gruber,' she said, 'I

love him so much, I can't stand him to see me like this."

"Like what?" I asked him.

"Well, sick," he said. "She was sick. She had a tumor in the brain. It was growing. She would get these awful headaches, and there was this problem of dropping things. Her legs were also starting to get clumsy. She started to trip all the time. You couldn't tell unless you watched her some. She had pretty good balance. Only hymns soothed her, so I sung her hymns."

* * *

The last time I saw Gretchen alive was a Saturday afternoon. I saw her on the weekends anyway because of my working long hours. There was a nice breeze blowing on top of the hill. It was grassy and had only three trees. They were old and gnarled and bent toward the town in the direction of the constant wind. Meow had joined me. I petted the cat as she settled down into my lap. Together, we watched the shadows creep up the towers across the way as the sun settled down behind us. Gretchen approached so silently that I didn't notice her until she sat down next to me. Meow growled a little the way cats do with a leading high note. Everything was turning orange as the sun settled lower in the horizon. Gretchen put her arm through mine and laid her head on my shoulder.

"They say the King is coming this way," she said softly.

"Yeah, that's the talk at the mill," I said, feeling very warm and comforted by her presence. "They say his troops are getting closer."

"The War will be here soon," she said softly, right into my ear.

I turned my head. She looked up at me and our lips met. We threw our arms around each other in a mad passionate kiss, let go and looked straight ahead.

She said, "We'll have to make a choice then. We'll have to choose sides."

"What do you mean?" I replied.

"Choose between the adversary and the king."

"Yes, they call him Adversary, don't they?" I noticed the first stars appearing.

"They say he's evil," she said, scooting a bit closer and holding my arm tighter.

"Not everybody. There's a lot of support for him at the factory."

As we watched the shadows overtake the light and the night creep across the earth, we were reminded of the coming darkness ... the approaching storm.

Gretchen said, "I don't think the adversary can overtake the king's forces. Do you?"

"No," I said, giving her a little squeeze with my arm. "I don't think so. I think he's got most of the country on his side."

"That's not what I heard," she said quietly. "I heard that the king's forces are small in comparison."

I didn't want to think about such dark things. Although, I didn't have any other thoughts. It was a dark time approaching.

Gretchen's mood lightened up a little as she said, "King Arthur said that right makes up for the lack of might. Didn't he say that?"

"I guess so," I said without really knowing. "You're the bookworm."

"I'm sure he said that. Right makes up for the lack of might. So what if the king's forces are small. We'll smash that adversary."

"We?" I asked. "What can children do?"

"We can do right."

"And that will make the difference?"

I looked down upon her soft beautiful face, smiled, and said, "I believe it will."

"I think," I said with an adult air, "that we shall just keep out of the way of the soldiers and let them do the fighting. We're just civilians, you know."

"Well..." she said a bit louder. "We can do *our* part!"

"And what is *our* part? Please tell me."

"Be obedient to the King. I am sure he is wise and good. He will know what we can do."

That was a question for philosophers, I thought.

"Who is the king, anyway?" I asked, never having known him. All I ever knew was working at Anne and Elvin's. I started thinking of them and said out into the air, "I wonder how Anne and Elvin are."

"They say," Gretchen said, going into her sing-song philosopher's voice, "that the first King was God himself. And then his son was king, and then his son, and then his son, and then his son ... why, they were all sons of God. The Church crowns him, you know."

"Yes, I imagine they do."

"Well, the king is the Son of God."

"I never thought about it."

"Well, you should. He's coming soon, and he's driving away the adversary, and I'll betcha that the adversary will get here first. And there will be a great division."

We watched the towers go dark against the thick blue sky.

"Those towers," said Gretchen very methodically, "those towers will go over to the adversary."

"Maybe not all of them," I said. "Some of them are my friends."

Blue turned to black in the night sky, and it became marked with scattered sparks of light.

The night uncovered its secrets.

"Look what darkness does," said Gretchen. "It shows us the light. That's what Uncle Gruber told me."

"What about the daytime?" I asked, having to have an opposite point of view. "The sunshine ..."

"Well, the sun is so bright, it blocks out all the stars. We can only see the rest of the universe ... the big picture ... only at night ... in the dark."

"Well," I said. "Then some darkness is good, huh?"

"Yeah, but I'm glad we have the daytime too."

We both said, "And the sunshine!" at the same time, and we laughed.

We sat there for a long time until Gretchen started shivering.

"You cold?" I asked.

"No-o-o-o!" she said with her jaw quivering. "Take me ho-o-o-o-me."

We got up and I helped her over to the hole. She sat down next to it while I descended halfway. I grabbed her about the waist and pulled her in toward me. She grabbed my neck with her arms. I told her to hold on with her legs. She couldn't, so we descended awkwardly, our cheeks pressed against each other. Chills ran down my spine. She was trembling hard. When we got down to her entry way, I stepped onto the rim and pushed us both through, hoping I would make it. Both our bodies made a tight fit. As I took her through the tunnel, her legs kicked against mine. By the time we reached the kitchen, she was standing on top of my feet, and I

helped her walk through the kitchen door. There, I handed her to her mother who was always taking care of the guys.

"Thank you Buck," Mother Underhill said, putting her arms around her baby and lifting her into her bosom. "I know what to do for her."

I never got to ask if there were something I could do to help. She whisked her away into the bedrooms. I went off to bed myself, feeling like I had been clubbed in the face. I rubbed my lips and chin with my hand just before I descended down into the pitch black darkness that was my apartment. A chill went down my back. I felt very afraid. I felt completely helpless, but I had hope that she would get better. I prayed that she would.

Chapter Seven

How the Darkness Entered In

"Bang! ... Thud!" shattered the night. It shook my apartment. I jumped out of bed, heard Meow screech, and ran for the door. It was closed! I panicked. *This door cannot be closed! I never close the door.* I pushed against it with all my might but it wouldn't budge. I dropped to the floor shaking. I grabbed my knees. I wanted to scream, but I had no breath. I sat there in stark terror, suffocating from the enclosure. I blacked out. I thought I dreamed of people yelling and beating against the door, but I wouldn't let them in.

Morning light came from the open porthole, about eight o'clock, gently touching me with its soft warm finger. The nightmare came to an end, and I thought I heard Gretchen saying, "Get up, Silly." I woke up shivering against the cold metal wall. I looked around to see if Gretchen was there, but she wasn't. Maybe she was behind the door. I said, "Gretchen?" Then a fog covered my mind, forgetting Gretchen. *Why was I on the floor?* I sat there for a moment trying to remember. Then it dawned on me. I rose up and pushed against the portal. It opened and banged against the outer wall. The noise slapped me in the face. I grabbed my head and reeled back with a painful headache. I put my hand outside the portal's rim to pull myself out. I felt a jelly-like substance on my welcome mat. I pulled my hand back and looked at it. It was red. My hand took on an alien character. I stared at it as I walked to the sink and turned on the spigot. Blood splattered across the sink as I let the water run over my alien extremity. I recognized it as blood, but I didn't know what it meant. Surely, someone had fallen. I had always been afraid

that some fat lady would fall down the hole and plug it up.

I didn't ever expect that someone else would clean up the mess at my doorstep, so I got a rag and let the water run in the sink, walking back and forth from the portal to the sink, wiping up the blood and washing out my rag. If I were on the farm, I would have expected it to be a prank someone had pulled at my expense. I thought of Fred and Allen laughing their heads off at throwing a slaughtered hog down the hole. I imagined that whatever it had been, it had slammed the door shut, and that was what woke me during the night. The longer I thought about it, the angrier I got.

When I went up for breakfast, there was only Dan and Daddy Cherry at the table, drinking their coffee and talking. There were some pancakes and sausages left on the stove, so I helped myself and forgot the anger. There were several plates left untouched on the table. I noticed especially that Gretchen and Mother Underhill's place settings were clean. The kitchen felt hollow without them. The thought crossed my mind that it was weird not seeing them, and I wondered who set the table and fixed the breakfast? Of course, Mother Underhill would have set the table before she went to bed. Perhaps, I thought, she was with Gretchen because Gretchen was sick.

As I sat down, I interrupted Dan and Daddy Cherry's conversation, not recognizing what they were saying. "Someone played a cruel joke on me last night. I wouldn't be surprised if it weren't my old friends Allen and Fred across the way. It seemed to be a carcass of some kind, but they thought better of it and removed it before I woke up."

Concentrating on my sausages and how scrumptious they tasted and the goodness of each syrupy bite of my pancakes I hadn't noticed the tears running down the blistered faces of Dan

and Daddy Cherry, until I glanced up just for a second. Their eyes were red and droopy. Neither had shaved for a couple of days. They didn't look at me ... neither of them. I sat there speechless, holding my breath. I felt rather stupid because I didn't want to know what they were saying. I denied what I heard. It couldn't be true.

Daddy Cherry blubbered, "... the sweetest angel there ever was. Nothing like her will ever come after."

Dan said, "God's love was in this household. Now he took it all back."

Daddy Cherry said softly, "Remember how she used to sit cross-legged there on the table before us and lecture us on God and the Universe? Things never understood, she made clear as only a little child could."

Dan replied, "Out of the mouths of babes. And her laughter, I remember and always will."

Daddy Cherry almost took a bite of toast, but stopped. "She would comfort us like a well aged bottle of wine, and we would be more awake afterward."

Dan offered, "She feared no man nor beast. Every creature was her friend."

I sat there listening to them with a growing fear, a lump expanding in my throat. I didn't get it at first. Maybe I just couldn't believe what my ears were telling me, but when I did, my mouth came open and a bite of pancake fell back to my plate. My mouth became dry, and I coughed out, "What do you mean?"

They kept on talking to each other. I had become a stranger and an outsider. I stared in disbelief as they both said, "Poor little Gretchen."

They both turned their sad faces towards me as I repeated angrily, "What do you mean!"

Dan blurted out, "Where were *you!* She was lying at your doorstep and you did *nothing!* We banged at your door for a long time. Where were you?"

"Oh God! It's not true. Is it?" I cried and stood, knocking the chair behind me to the floor. I brought my hands to my face, and in a moment of hysteria, I cried out again, "Oh God! I didn't know it was her! I swear to God I didn't know it was her! I couldn't get the door open!"

I felt I had fallen down that dark pit instead of Gretchen. I couldn't move. My legs turned to lead, and my face stung all over. I squirmed and twisted, scraping my face with my hands and trying to run away, but I felt like I was stuck in a tar pit.

"Just let her life ebb away!" echoed Dan's voice somewhere in my head. Daddy Cherry's voice said, "Don't be so harsh on the boy," but the empty words didn't comfort me. The blackness of the tar engulfed me. It entered my throat and worked itself down like a big worm into my heart and ate away the last glimpse of light that remained.

* * *

I don't remember making my way down to my portal. I don't know how I got there. A part of me was watching as I wiped my hands over the floor and walls where earlier I had cleaned up what now I knew to be Gretchen's blood. That little girl had loved me so. *It was Gretchen's blood.* I burst into tears. After a while, something made me look up. I saw the round hole of blue sky above in the surrounding darkness. There was a single star shining in that patch of daylight. I raised my fist and "Oh God!" shot out of my mouth like cannon fire into the heavens above.

After a time of uncontrolled sobbing, I reached over and touched the latch that connected the portal to the wall of the pipe that made up the descent. I decided that I would go into town

and buy a padlock. I would lock that door open, and never would it be closed again.

I walked the three miles into town sullenly, still in shock. I bought a large padlock and put it in my pocket. It pulled down on my suspenders as I walked home. It weighed heavily in my pocket, as though I carried my heart in there.

By the time I returned the stars were out, but I didn't look at them. I had no reason to. Gretchen was gone, and looking at stars was something I had done with her. I arrived at the hill, climbed up, and descended into the dark hole. It was a bitter darkness. Had it become my friend now? I felt it welcome me. When I reached the portal, I padlocked my oblong metal door to the outside wall. Now I would feel safe. I descended into my apartment and threw the keys out the window. I climbed into my bunk and cried myself to sleep with Meow curled up against my chest softly purring. She was now my only comfort besides the darkness.

* * *

I dreamed Meow was Gretchen. We were having an argument. I yelled at her for leaving. She screamed and scratched at me with cat paws and ran away. I ran after her but couldn't catch up. I yelled at her again as she became smaller and smaller in the dark clouds above. When I stopped running, she turned and whispered, "I'm sorry."

* * *

I must have slept for a long time. It was bright daylight outside when I awakened. I heard the incessant meow of a cat. At first the sound was far away in the sunlight, as were the passing cars and people talking in the distance. As the meowing came closer I became more awake and saw Meow crying right into my face.

At the same time, I heard Mother Underhill calling, "Are you all right, Buck? I say, are

you all right?"

I shouted back a hoarse "Yeah!" and under my breath I said, "Yeah, right."

I petted Meow, who kept on meowing.

"What are you all upset about today?" I asked the cat as I sat up. "What's wrong? Did you miss your breakfast this morning?"

I felt a bit woozy and weak.

"Are you coming up to eat yet?" Mother Underhill called again. "We haven't seen you in two days! Ya need to feed your cat and yourself as well!"

I jumped down and had to hold onto the bed to keep the room from spinning out from under me. I went to the sink, reached underneath, and brought out the bag of cat food. I filled Meow's dish, and she rushed at it and proceeded to chow down with a chomp, chomp, chomp. Next, I gave her some water in her other dish and decided I needed to feed myself. My stomach was growling like Meow at her dish with her ears pulled back. The first thing I did before getting dressed was to drink a large tumbler of water.

Climbing up the ladder was treacherous. I was dizzy and felt like I was going to faint. I had to breathe hard in order to keep my eyes open.

"You need some help, Dear?" called Mother Underhill from far away.

"No," I called back. "I can make it."

I thought of letting go the rungs and fall back to join Gretchen, but I made myself go faster. It was a good thirty yards up to her place. When I got in the doorway with the yellow light bulb shining from the middle of the ceiling, Mother Underhill pulled me into her arms and wrapped me up in her bosom, carrying me into the kitchen. I was much taller than she, so it was

a mystery how her round form carried me there. She was both strong and fast. She had me at the table feeding me broth before I knew what was happening. I thought it was so funny that I started laughing.

"Now there's a good spirit," she said. "I've got some nice biscuits and gravy if you think you can handle that."

I took a deep breath and nodded. By the time she had warmed up the biscuits and gravy I had revived enough to eat on my own strength. She sat watching me. I guessed it was because there was no one else in the room to stare at. She was used to listening to the conversations that went on in the kitchen, and I wasn't talking. When I started giggling again, she said, "He's gone balmy with so much attention."

I couldn't finish the biscuits and gravy because of the exhilaration that came over me. All I could do was to giggle and say, "Precious Gretchen ... precious precious Gretchen ..."

I remembered that during the middle of the night I had dreamed about Gretchen. I turned to Mother Underhill. I wondered how she must be hurting inside. She seemed to be so selfless, taking care of me when she could have been cloistered and hidden in her grief. I hoped to cheer her up.

"I just remembered," I said, calming down a bit. "I had a dream about Gretchen."

"Yes?" she said, very interested. "Please do tell."

I could remember several dreams about her, but decided to focus on one I thought she would like.

"It was so *real*! She was dressed in a single white gown, and she glowed. There was a brilliant light. I felt so good inside ... so comforted ... and happy! How could I forget?"

Mother Underhill's eyes were leaking, but she was still smiling. She took out her hanky to wipe away her tears.

“It was so real!” I said again. “Oh, Mama!”

With that, I covered my mouth. I hadn't meant to say mama. I had never called anyone mama before, and I wasn't sure if I weren't swearing.

She grabbed me off my chair and smothered me in her huge bosom ... again.

“She was tellin' you she is all right,” she sobbed, squeezing me at every emphasis.

I couldn't breathe until she let me go. I thought I was going to suffocate.

* * *

Funerals are such drab affairs. It always rains upon a circle of dark umbrellas under which there are people sniffing and staring down. The priest intones a sacred ritual in a monotone voice meant to comfort the grieving, but it only adds to the morbid atmosphere. I wouldn't be telling it except for something peculiar that happened.

A bluebird flew under my umbrella and lit upon my shoulder, bobbed its little head here and there, looking at everyone, whistled as if to say, “Silly, silly, silly,” and flew off into the rain. I had been dry-eyed all day until then. I started sobbing uncontrollably, and Mother Underhill grabbed me by the shoulders with one arm and pulled me close. She smelled of roses.

No one had a car, so when it was over we walked in single file, looking like a giant black caterpillar, back to the hill the way we had come, which was only a couple blocks away, and silently slithered down our hole like an embarrassed snake.

* * *

The next day I got a family. Mother Underhill and Daddy Cherry took me into town to

the courthouse and adopted me, I assumed, at the loss of Gretchen. I had always been treated as a part of the family when Gretchen was alive, and now it had become legal. I had a family to belong to for the first time. My name became Buckminister Underhill.

I was reminded of the story of Tarzan who had been adopted by a huge ape when the ape lost her own child. Mother Underhill pampered me at every opportunity. She even offered me Gretchen's room, but I couldn't do that. It had become a holy shrine that shouldn't be disturbed. I had glanced in there at one time, but I couldn't step inside. She was still there, even though she was dead. Her beautiful spirit still filled the place.

My feelings towards myself and my life greatly improved after the recurring appearances of Gretchen in my dreams. Before, I was afraid of the dark and tight places. Afterward, I slept well at night. Life became full of congenialities. With Gretchen, there had always been excitement. But with her family, there was a calm sense of home. That was something new to my experience.

Chapter Eight

Beginnings of War

Dan was not one of the congenialities. He still blamed me for Gretchen's death. On top of that, I had missed work three days in a row. He wouldn't sponsor me anymore. He said I had to pay for my lodging and food. When I brought it up, I was told by the Underhills that wasn't necessary because I was now part of the family. I still felt the need to work. When asked if I would rather go to school, I opted out. I was used to work. I had done it all of my life, plus the fact that I was old enough to get wages but young enough to need a sponsor at the mill. Dan was still a good man. He told me to look up Allen. So I did.

Fred and Allen worked in the pump foundry where they made huge water pumps for irrigation. Fred worked directly with the molten metal, whereas Allen worked in the woodshop where they made and maintained or repaired the molds for the pumps. He was really good at wood working and carving. I had seen him do that on the farm. He carved all kinds of animals and strange shapes just for fun. He took me on as an apprentice.

Even though I was apprenticed to Allen, Fred sometimes gave me work. He showed me how to chisel out the big bells that covered the pumps and paint them inside and out with red-lead to seal the metal from rust and corrosion.

Allen had me repair the wooden molds to all parts of the pump. For small repairs, we used epoxy and ground the areas down smooth to fit with the rest of the mold. Other times we had to make new parts with blocks of wood cut with table saws, jig saws, or band saws into the

proper shapes ground down with flat sanders or cylindrical sanders. We then glued them into the larger mold. Sometimes we had to use or invent jigs to get the right geometrical shape.

The smells of the woodshop attracted my nose. I loved the smell of pine, walnut and other hardwoods, but the epoxy stunk like a skunk or worse. It made me wrinkle up my nose horribly.

* * *

My training took five years, and the interesting work helped me forget about Gretchen. She became something of my childhood that I packed away in my memories. She might have been in the next room or just around the corner, but that feeling soon became lost to an invisible room that was beyond my reach, so I left her there and moved on to the other things in my life, largely my work.

I was sixteen now and at the age where I started noticing girls, not that I hadn't noticed Gretchen, but she had been my companion, not a girl. Allen and Fred often took me up to the towers to the bar room where we first started out. They had fun by drinking and dancing with the girls while I would sit at a table sipping an occasional root beer or ginger beer. I promised my parents that I wouldn't drink alcohol. One of the girls there seemed to be attracted to me even though I was a couple of years younger. She sat at my table and started up a conversation, and we would share a root beer. Sometimes though, she would have a real beer. I was comfortable around her. She made it easy to talk. Her name was Bo. She was dark like an Indian and had black hair, but from listening to her accent, I imagined she was from South America.

She had a talent of telling stories. The whole group often sat around in a circle instead of

dancing and have her tell about the Egyptian mummy coming to life after being transported on a ship to here in Kingsland. Or she would talk about witches and voodoo in the Caribbean. She had a library of Indian folklore about the magic that Indian and Tibetan yogis had due to their great mental powers. She took me to her apartment one time and showed me shelves and shelves of books on Hinduism and Yoga.

One night at the bar, Bo and I sat at one of the round tables. She told me that I didn't know how to have fun. I could see she was going to give me a lecture.

"I don't ever see you dance or sing," she said. "What do you do to have fun? All you do is work at the factory. Aren't you going to explode? You've got to let off steam once in a while or you'll go bazonkers!"

"I have lots of fun," I said. "In my spare time, I visit Uncle Gruber. He's a full professor. He teaches me history, science, and literature. We look up at the stars through his telescope and talk about the very basic things of the Universe. He taught me to read and write."

"E-gads!" she exclaimed. "We have a true stuffed shirt here. You like to read? Read this."

She slapped down a magazine in front of me with a smiling, curly, blonde with big breasts popping out of her blouse. She flipped through the pages, and I think I turned red. My face felt really hot. She stopped at an article entitled *The Nature of Art* and slapped her hand on top of it.

"There you go," she said emphatically. "Read that!"

I read through the article in a couple of glances. It was about living in the here and now and getting down to your feelings, that man's moral nature led to judgments, bigotry and war. His nature was to be as children and explore his environment and to express what comes

natural. The article showed several examples of art that were swatches of color, naked girls in odd poses and stick sculptures that didn't make any sense.

"You see?" cried Bo. " You've got to open up. Let yourself go. Be naked! Have sex!"

She peered closely into my eyes.

"You have been with a girl, haven't you?" she asked.

"No," I said weakly.

She laughed hilariously, throwing herself back into her chair.

"I'm just joking!" she said, coming back into my face. "Loosen up a little. Lighten up, will ya?"

She grabbed my hand, saying, "Come on. Let's dance!"

I thought she was going to say "Let's have sex" or something, but she didn't. We got up, moving away from the tables. She showed me how to dance. It was more like slithering and bobbing up and down and throwing your hips out of joint.

* * *

That night as I lay in my bunk, I thought I wanted to have sex with Bo even though she was much older than me, but I started thinking of that dream I had about Gretchen glowing like the sun at noon-day. She was so innocent and didn't judge people. I felt a peace come over me. The feelings of lust dissipated, and I gave up thinking about Bo and started thinking of Mother Underhill and Daddy Cherry. They were a decent family. I had never seen such nice people on the farm. They worked hard. They expressed a homely love and kindness and a concern for their fellow man. They never complained about their lot in life. They never found fault with other people, even though they joked about the people living in the towers. Their jokes, though,

usually wound up in feelings of pathos for their living in sin, as they called it. They even said that Allen and Fred had a spark of goodness in them and always would. They were simple folk who worked and loved and lived in a hole in the ground.

I asked Mama Underhill once why they lived underground. All she said was "because we made it ourselves." That didn't settle in my mind well, because I knew that the people in the towers across the way made their own dwellings too. So one day I asked Dan and Daddy Cherry about it as we walked to work.

"We're mechanics," said Daddy Cherry. "We were miners once too, but the mines played out. No more ore. Or the ore was bad. And there was the war. Our homes were destroyed, and after the war, no one owned the mine, so we moved in."

"The mines went under," Dan interjected, "and so did we." He put his hands in his pockets and looked up to the sky, not the sky directly, but to his own thoughts.

"We know that temperature doesn't change much down there," continued Daddy Cherry, "and we could fit pipes together and put machinery together, and so, that became our home. We all knew each other already and trusted each other, so we formed a commune."

That satisfied my mind on that question, but what about the towers? Why were they towers instead of square houses all in a row?

Dan didn't look at me, just stared ahead into the air, so I asked Daddy Cherry.

He said, "Why, the factory, in the old days before the war, built your homes for you. All we got was row houses. Now them that live in the towers are musicians, writers, painters, carpenters and cabinet makers, millwrights and architects, designers of all sorts, all artists and artisans ... they who build civilization."

I think he was philosophizing because the towers looked more like a shanty town when you were actually there or maybe I hadn't seen the more beautiful parts of it. There was one thing he said that I thought might be true, about the musicians. I had never paid much attention to them when I was with Allen and Fred, maybe because they were loud and fit in like the furniture or the wall hangings made of macrame'. They were just there, and I had to force myself to recognize them. The music at Allen and Fred's was live. It didn't come from stereos or radios. They didn't even have sound equipment.

There was no electricity at the towers, now that I come to think of it. It was not well lighted as at home. That's why it always seemed dark there. They had coal oil lamps that gave out a yellowish or sometimes reddish glow when seen from a distance. That was part of their lifestyle. They lived in perpetual darkness, except during the day, there was the skylights which provided some moonlight at night. That's it. They were people of the night with all night parties going on. Of course, there was a natural rhythm and flow to their lives. They had sunlight coming through their windows during the day, and when it was night, it was night. When it was day, it was day. Not so at home. It was perpetually lit up, at least in the kitchen and bathroom. I think I was the only one at home that let my room go dark.

* * *

Bo led me to some of the more beautiful parts of the towers. I went with her on one of my days off. We saw artist studios lit with huge glass windows and architects and design offices with lens focused sky lights. I saw a lot of mirrors used in their offices. My biggest impression was that the whole of the towers was one huge organic building. One part of the towers grew out of another. Nothing seemed tacked on. Trees were often used as walls or ceiling and

branches interwoven with stairwells winding up through the towers. Doors and cabinets looked like part of the structure. It was all one whole.

The odd thing was that the people always spoke a slang that continually referred to God and sex. They wished curses to come upon each other and every object they talked about. None of that ever happened with the underhill people.

* * *

We came to one artist studio where Bo and Will addressed each other as if they were old friends, but I never saw him at Allen and Fred's.

"Hi Will," she said cordially. "Am I on time? This is Buck. He's from Fred and Allen's place. We're old friends."

Will was thin and short and wore a black barrette on his bald head. He took my hand and looked at me with quite an interest. He said, scanning my body with his eyes, "Yes, you are quite on time. And how are you my young friend? Are you a model too?"

"No," I replied, taking my hand back from an oily and limp handshake. I wiped my hand on my pants.

"What do you do? a musician, perhaps?"

"I work at the foundry with Allen and Fred," I said.

"Oh, one of those artisans that make the fat and rich get fatter and richer. I like you. Won't you have a seat over here and you can watch a real artist at work." He waved his hand toward a couch facing his easel.

The couch was an antique, older than my grandfather ... if I had a grandfather. I sat down and got the surprise of my life. Bo started undressing right in front of me, laying her clothes on

the couch next to me. She stripped down to her birthday suit and started twirling in front of me.

"Like my bod?" she asked. Pointing to Will, she said, "He does."

"Look at these curves," he said as he ran his hands down her sides, ending up on her hips. He swatted her behind and said, "Okay, let's get to it. Up, up!" He escorted her to a stand with a stool on it. "Right there. Move this leg just over here." He took a silk sheet or piece of uncut cloth and draped over parts of her body, but not to cover her up.

I'm sure my face had turned beet red as she turned her head and smiled. My whole body froze. I couldn't breathe or take my eyes off of her. I kept swallowing as my throat and mouth became dry. Sweat drenched my clothes. I wanted to jump up and shout, but I remained as stiff as a statue. I was in love.

* * *

There was another occasion in which Bo took me to see herself photographed in the nude in a hundred different poses. It took an hour that passed too fast for me. I got the impression that she sold herself for a living, ... at least to the arts. She never told me she was a model. To her, it was just business. To me, it was like being attracted to a flaming fire.

* * *

And so, the war started. I was torn between the decency of my new found family under the hill and Bo, the sweet and seductive temptress. The war started with me.

"What war?" Allen asked me as we worked on a mold in the shop. "Everyone has been talking of *The War*. *The War* is coming. We heard of it at Anne and Elvin's. You've heard of it all your life. The King is driving the forces of evil before him. The King is sitting pretty in Capitol City, having a vodka. If there ever has been a war going on, it has been little skirmishes

in the outer districts of the kingdom. No war is coming in *our* direction."

"The King doesn't drink," I said in his divine defense. I smoothed down a piece of epoxy on the wooden mold with a sandpaper block, and the smell of it stung my nose.

"Not in public, mind you," he said, turning the bell shaped structure away from me. I had to follow it around to do my sanding, and then I got in his way. I had to stand there with the sandpaper block in my hand. He peered down his nose at me and said, "I bet he takes a snort or two when nobody is looking. They all do it. All the rich are corrupt." He finished off where I had been sanding.

He looked at me and said, "What are you doing standing there with your thumb up your ass?" I shrugged my shoulders, and he said, "Help me lift this over there."

It was difficult because it was curved and heavy, and I almost dropped it.

"What's this you're doing with Bo?" he asked after getting the mold on the high shelf just right. He had taken it out of my hands and hefted it up there as though it were nothing. I felt like he was just being kind to me, letting me help out in the shop. He stood on one leg and leaned over my way.

"Oh, she's just showing me around," I said.

He put his hand on my shoulder and asked, "Hey, you two been in bed yet?"

"No," I said, quite embarrassed.

He said with a wink, "She's a fun gal."

I felt stabbed in the heart. My face burned. I tried not to say anything, but I blurted out, "She's too old for me."

Allen looked at me as if he could tell I had strong feelings for her. I was pretty easy to

read, especially since he practically raised me.

"Hey, hey!" he rang out. "That's the way to go. You just keep following her around. She'll let you in. That's the kind of gal she is." He sang to the tune of an old bar song about a girl and guy making love.

After he saw that I was fuming, we got back onto the subject of the King and the coming war.

"Which side will you take when the war comes, Buck?" Allen asked.

He had to calm me down with a few jokes and tickle me before I would talk to him.

"The King's side. Who else? You want me to side with the adversary?"

Allen took down another mold for a bell that needed to be repaired. He let me heft some of it.

"There is talk at home that the king already crossed the border and is heading this way," I said. "Dan and Daddy Cherry said we're going to have to choose sides pretty soon."

"Not in my lifetime, old man. Maybe in your lifetime, but not in mine."

I could tell Allen had made his choice by deciding not to decide. He would continue his life with no thought of the King except to make the King do or be whatever was convenient for Allen. He supported his lifestyle of wine, women, and song by saying the King would do the same.

Dan, Daddy Cherry, and Mama Underhill all agreed that they lived a decent and moral life, went to work, earned a living, supported the family, and loved their neighbor as themselves, all because that is what the King would do ... different life style, same reason.

Both my new adopted family and my friends Fred and Allen chose the King. Only, while

the Underhills believed that the King was the Son of God, my friends believed that he was a son of a bitch. How convenient.

* * *

Sitting around the dinner table one night, a question rolled around in my mind. I gingerly ate my porkchop which was usually my favorite food. Mama Underhill was the only one I knew who could make them tender and juicy, yet, I wasn't hungry. It took me a long time to eat it. By the time I finished, all the men were drinking their coffee and talking and Mama Underhill started clearing the table. When she took my dishes, I spoke to her.

"What if a girl wants to go to bed with you?"

The five men besides Dan and Daddy Cherry stopped their talking and looked straight at me.

Emer, a rough looking man with a broad jaw and broad shoulders, said, "She's the wrong type of girl. Stay away from her."

"Yeah, yeah," they all agreed.

Daddy Cherry asked, "Didn't you and Gretchen sleep together one night?"

"Yes," I said perplexed, not wanting to share that divine moment with anyone. "But that was different."

"How different?" he asked.

"We didn't do anything," I said with some pain.

"How different?" he asked again.

"I loved her," I said, almost in tears.

"Do you love this other girl?" asked Daddy Cherry.

Dan looked on with a grimace across his face.

"Not like Gretchen," I said.

Daddy Cherry said, "Then you don't love this girl." He went on to pick his teeth with a

toothpick, not looking at me.

Peter, the one with straight black hair who couldn't grow a beard, leaned out around Emer, supported his head in his hand and said, "It's lust ... just pure unadulterated lust."

Mama Underhill sat down beside me, wiping her hands with her apron and leaned towards me, saying, "You never did any funny stuff with our Gretchen, now did you?"

"Of course not!" I reacted.

"Well, now," she said. "There's your answer."

Emer spoke up. "I had a wife once, name of Nancy. When we met and fell in love, we never messed around with each other. We just up and got married. We didn't play around and do things we oughtn't. We got married and started a family."

"Yeah," said Peter. "That's what God made men and women for ... to have families. Anything else is a disgrace and a weakness of character."

Weakness of character. I wondered if my character was strong enough to not want Bo. I knew it wasn't.

Then we got on the subject of drinking beer. They knew what kind of environment I was exposed to visiting Allen and Fred. I told them that I only started because there had been no water, but I was not drinking now.

Mama Underhill added, "Now, drinking beer can weaken your character."

"Oh, I didn't drink very much," I said, feeling a little guilty. "I only drank one or two to be polite."

"You can't control it," she said. "It will control you one day, and then it will be too late."

"Well," I said, "I don't do it anymore."

"Well," she said, "I'm glad you stopped."

I had a deep seated feeling of goodness in my heart that burned whenever I talked to my new family. I felt surrounded by people who cared. I could call them my guardian angels because they were always watching out for me. When we said goodnight, I expressed my gratitude and walked away with a floating sensation all the way down to my bunk. I had not felt like that since I had been with Gretchen. It fortified me for what was coming up next.

* * *

I had forgotten there were mountains. I couldn't see them from the hill where we lived. I usually looked towards the towers and the plains beyond instead of towards the mountains behind the hill. Yet, there were other mountains I could see from the towers far off to the east. They were the Blue Mountains, beyond which, was the capital city of KingsGaard. There were mountains to the south also. They were near the borders. You couldn't see it for the trees, except from the towers, but there was a lake between the city and the western mountains. It was at the base of those mountains where I had taken Anne and Elvin's sheep.

The last time I went up to visit Allen and Fred, Bo was there. She was on the couch with a guy who was rubbing her sternum. She said, talking to some other girl, that it was quite relaxing. I sat down at a table to listen to the music and ordered a gingerale, not drinking the beer they offered me. Allen was there playing his trumpet with the band. I had never seen him play before. It was interesting. I thought I would wait until he was through and talk with him, but Bo came over and grabbed my arm and said, "Come on, we're going to the lake. I know a special place where we can make love."

I found myself being taken down to the street and entering an automobile. I couldn't

summon the power to say no. Instead, I said, "I didn't know you had an automobile."

"I don't," she said. "It's my boyfriend's."

She had a boy friend? She was in a strange mood. She seemed to be making love to a guy on the couch at Allen and Fred's, and she grabbed me to take me down to the lake.

We didn't say much on the way. I kept thinking we were going to make out and got excited. I thought for sure I was not going to come back a virgin. Yet, in a silent moment of our conversation, I distinctly heard my name being called. It was a very mild and clear voice. The clarity astonished me. I turned my head to look at Bo and said, "What?"

"I didn't say anything," she said.

From that point on, my bladder got very full, begging to hurt. I felt that if we didn't stop, I would wet my pants.

"I hear the call of Nature," I said.

"So do I Bucko," she said, grabbing my leg.

"I mean," I said, getting embarrassed, "is there some place we can stop? I have to go."

There was a light up ahead. I could see that it was a filling station as we approached it. I really hoped Bo would stop. She pulled into the drive that was a white glow against the surrounding darkness. We moved up against the side of the green building. I could see two doors. One said "Men" and the other "Women". I got out. "I'll be a moment," I said. While in the men's restroom I heard that angel voice again. "Buck." The memory of it rang like a crystal bell all the way back to the automobile.

When I got in, I noticed that Bo's countenance had changed. She turned the automobile around and burned rubber, the tires screeching as we raced onto the highway. I noticed that we

were not heading to the lake. I was again embarrassed as I asked, "Aren't we going in the wrong direction?"

Bo blurted out, "No we're not! I'm taking you home."

We didn't talk the whole drive back. I noticed every light that shone in the darkness. I studied the lights of the towers as we approached, watching the towers grow larger and larger until we were in the city once again. She pulled up to the hill where I lived, not the towers. I could see my porthole shining in the dark night and the silhouette of Meow waiting up for me. I was relieved when the automobile stopped, but confused.

I got out of the automobile and leaned down and said "Thank You," not knowing what else to say.

She said, "This is where you belong. Stay over here."

"Okay," I said timidly and shut the door.

She yelled back, "You know I can't compete with Gretchen!" and turned the automobile around, burning rubber as she sped down the street. I felt as though I had been slapped in the face. I walked away stunned, but I felt like floating on air as I ascended the hill. I looked up at the stars and then back to the towers. I scratched my head. Had Gretchen spoken to Bo?

That was the last time I saw Bo until after the war. In fact, that was the last time I ever went back to the towers.

* * *

After staring at the stars for a while, I sort of floated down the hole to my apartment. Meow greeted me as I entered and jumped up on the bunk, knowing that's where I was headed.

Going to bed that night I felt quite different. I think I had grown a little. I was put in my

place and I have never forgotten it. Would I have gone through with it? I don't know. I was saved by an act of Nature and by Divine Providence. Perhaps it was my way of escaping out of a bad situation, and I had a special angel helping me.

I often wondered after that night about Bo hearing Gretchen's voice. She must have, by what she said at parting. But maybe that's not what she meant. Gretchen had been there, nevertheless. I had dreamed of her that night, appearing as a bright angel.

Chapter Nine

Union

Trouble started brewing at the factory. It was the King's factory, and there was talk of union. I was surprised because I thought it was like stealing. I knew that a union wouldn't necessarily own the factory, but it would own the factory workers. The workers would no longer owe their allegiance to the King. They would be loyal to the union, and if the King is the law, then the union members would be considered outlaws. They would be operating outside the law.

Unionizers got up on boxes or barrels to preach their doctrine of wrongful allegiance, as I called it, drawing crowds from their work places. Supervisors would command the workers back to their jobs. There would be fights started because others who considered themselves more loyal to the King would try to drive the workers back by using clubs. I thought this so unnecessary. It only created ill feelings and separated the workers into parties – the loyalists and the unionists.

Unionists taught strange doctrine. It was that rich landowners were corrupt, and the land should be owned by all the people. The workers should have a say in what goes on in the factories. All people are equal, and we should live as a classless society where everyone worked for a living. The King's laws were not enough to provide for the needs of all the people. Communities should be governed by their own laws and their own elected judges, not by those appointed by the King and his corrupt governors. They wanted clothing, housing, groceries and

medical aid to be free to the workers. They complained that the governors and judges of the land had too much power and that authority should be distributed among all the people, that the people should decide what was right or wrong, that the people should be free to do according to their own wills. As a union, all the people would be free to control their own destiny, have control over their own jobs and control the factories. They would right all the wrongs done to them. The wrongs they listed were the right to govern themselves, choose their own destiny without Big Brother watching over them, establish safer working conditions, have longer breaks, greater privileges, shorter work weeks, a greater labor force, have a say in the merchandising of what was made, and decide about tariffs and international trade. And the list went on.

* * *

At home, Daddy Cherry said, “If the demands of the unionists were met, there would be fewer criminals in the jails, not because there would be fewer people breaking the law, mind you, but because there would be fewer *laws* to break! And we’d have criminals rule over us, going against the King and his mandates.”

Dan added, “What they don’t tell you is that workers will be robbed blind by union dues, which will increase yearly to fill the pockets of the ever greedier party bosses who would be outside the law of both King and union.”

Emer spoke up after gnawing on a chicken leg until it was perfectly bare. “They teach that within a union is protection, but who is going to protect you from the union?”

Peter said, “Yeah! Even now, you can’t oppose them without a fist fight. If you say anything they don’t like, they punch you. They believe it will be the true democracy, but they

don't allow opposing views.”

“That doesn't sound like they want a democracy,” added Mama Underhill. “It sounds like a dictatorship to me.”

“What the King has done,” Daddy Cherry said, “is given us good and righteous laws to protect us and to guide us to be upright and moral citizens ... to do good to one another ... to take care of one another. What else can be done? If the natural man has to decide what we should do, we should all become corrupt.”

“It's not the King's aides that are corrupt,” remarked one of the other men as he lit his pipe. “It's the god-forsaking unionists.”

I was listening to all of this, and when there was a pause, I asked, “Do you mean that the unionists are forsaking God, or was that a cuss word?”

Everyone laughed, and the man spoke up again.

“But I do mean it. They are forsaking God and choosing their own selves to guide mankind.”

Daddy Cherry said, “Yes, and you'll find that the King's laws are directly correlated with the ancient texts of the prophets.”

* * *

I knew that the unionists meant well and that a lot of their proposals were good, such as providing safer working conditions, continuing education, more labor saving devices and socialized medicine, but as for socializing the whole nation with the unionists in control, I doubted their vision. After all, the King already owned everything. There were no rich landowners, and the King assured us that there was plenty and to spare for our high population.

All we had to do was to be less selfish. He left that part up to us. The King already had a program to take care of the poor, but as far as I could see, the unionists just wanted to be in charge of it. What I could see from their arguments, and I was still quite young and unsophisticated, was that they were pretty much lying to the people in order to put themselves into power.

* * *

Arguments and fist fights became more frequent and more inflamed. Work had become impossible. I remember at the foundry where I worked, Allen looked out the window and saw a fist fight. He said, "Come on kid, let's go get our fists bloody," and he rushed outside. All I wanted was to finish my work. But with all the commotion, I was beginning to feel helpless and a bit hopeless. How could I work alone? One of my components was missing. I could finish off the larger bell mold, but I had no direction from there. There was no one else in the shop, so, I wound up slipping out the door and going home. No one was watching the main gate as I passed. That day, it seemed like no one cared for working. It had turned into a big brawl throughout the factory.

Fighting spread from the factory into the streets. It was mob rule. There were not enough constables. They couldn't arrest everyone, and some of them were drawn into the melee.

The next day after breakfast, a lot of us were climbing up to the top portal to go to work. Emer was on top. He poked his head out first and got it struck with a club. Peter caught him as he sank. He was passed down the hole to the first passageway. Emer cried, "Get back down. There's a pack of unionists up there." The hole was closed and everyone went down and took care of Emer.

I could here a muffled cry from above, “Come out o’ there you muggers! We’ll teach ya what’s comin’.”

When all of us got into the passageway where they were caring for Emer, Daddy Cherry called, “This way to the streets!”

I closed the hatch to the rooms behind us and locked it so the women would be safe. I caught up to the men going down a long passageway that seemed to go for miles. When we came out, it was on the side of a hill behind a lot of shrubbery and trees. The factory gate was just beyond. I thought, how ingenious.

The only people I saw walking through the gate were those pledging their allegiance to the King, but I saw some I knew to be unionists getting through. I didn’t say anything. I didn’t want to start a fight.

There was a crowd gathering at the gate. They all had clubs. If we were to go through the gate, we would have to go through them.

“Well, that’s that, now, isn’t it?” Elam said, putting his hands in his pockets.

We stood there staring at the mob. As we did, more of them came from behind showing up for work. The two parties stood before the gate staring at each other. There seemed to be more of us than them.

As more men gathered, I was pushed towards the mob from behind. The loyalists started shouting expletives with the armed mob shouting back. The two groups approached each other. I was too big to slink away and found this tough guy shouting in my face. The next moment fists and clubs were swinging. I found I had to defend myself, so I started hitting and grabbing and being hit in return. I pushed my way through, grabbing bodies and shoving them aside

despite the numbness and blood spreading over my face. I tasted the blood, and it gave me strength to fight back. I pushed and grabbed and prodded my way through to the fence. I climbed to the top, kicking my way above the mob. When I reached the top, I carefully lay on the barbed wire and rolled over, dropping to the ground, leaving blood and some of my shirt behind on the fence. I lay there in a dazed stupor for a couple of minutes, and then got up and ran over to the guardhouse. I didn't know what to do until I saw a fire hose.

Unionists followed my example and were climbing the fence. The loyalists standing around started helping me as soon as they saw me taking hold of the fire hose. We unrolled it, turned it on and with several of us holding it, turned it onto the unionists, knocking them off the fence. We sprayed through the fence, knocking down those that got too close to it. The crowd moved back. Most of the loyalists returned, and we went to work that day.

I got a lot of pats on the back, but I had a big headache. There were several lumps on my head. I spent most of the day sleeping in a corner in the wood shop. Allen didn't bother me. He only smiled.

That evening, we went home through the same tunnel by which we had arrived.

* * *

Next morning, there were no mobs waiting at the exit hole, and when we looked out, there were no mobs in the streets. We walked towards the factory the way we normally went. There was a wind blowing so strong we had to lean forward. The trees bowed towards us as though we were being worshiped. Those wearing hats had to hold them down or lose them. There were several hats blowing past in the wind. Dark clouds boiled overhead. We met stragglers on the way that finally formed into a large gathering of loyalists walking together

towards the factory. When we got three blocks from the factory, we were jolted to a sudden stop. I pushed forward to see why.

There was no factory to be seen. Either there was a dark thick fog ahead or night had simply forgotten to leave beyond the end of the street. The darkness that had prevailed yesterday at the fence had joined the darkness from the clouds above in one swirling, roiling mass of darkness. Where I thought the fence and gate of the factory ought to be, I saw that the fog had sprouted arms and legs, and it was gesticulating in weird patterns as though the whole were one giant insect with a thousand independent arms and legs on its back trying to right itself. Then I saw that the darkness had spouted horses, dark horses with red glowing eyes rising up and clawing at the air. They neighed and stamped their feet on the asphalt. Their riders had trouble keeping them from charging the lot of us. That darkness was a visible fear that swirled forward and gripped my heart as it did all of us, and I thought I had eaten stinging nettle for breakfast. I felt prickly all over.

Chapter Ten

The War

Things like this weren't supposed to happen. Dreams, and especially nightmares, were supposed to stay in your sleep. I knew I was wide awake. I looked around me at the men. A shaft of light came down out of the dark heaven and I saw their faces. They were all contorted in fierce grins as though crazed with fear. But the storm blowing at us from the factory couldn't blot out the light. There was at least one of us that dared speak up. It was Daddy Cherry. The contortion in his face wasn't fear. It was indignity and revulsion.

He said, raising his fist, "We know who thou art! Thou art the devil! The enemy to the King! We will not fear you!"

Thunder boomed from the darkness before us and blew us backwards, like a grove of trees bending in the wind, but we straightened ourselves.

"We will not give in to the evil!" Daddy Cherry called out. With that, he started marching forward, waving his walking stick in the air - it was funny that I had never noticed that stick before. We all followed him and started marching towards Hell.

Guns from within the darkness fired. Some of us fell. The dark horses could be held back no longer. They charged. We charged, but we stopped short, not reaching the unionists, because from the left there was a third charge of white horses whose riders wore silver armor. We yelled and shouted, "God save the King!" Light poured in upon us and we were saved.

We were overcome by our own declaration, "It is the King! It is the King!" and shed

many tears.

All the King's horsemen galloped between us and the darkness, pushing the darkness before them.

Chills ran up and down my spine to see such a sight. The stories I heard as children had come to pass. The King's forces, driving the evil before them were actually here in our district. It was real. It was no longer a legend.

I trembled as I saw hundreds of silver clad knights on white horses galloped past me, driving the black storm back into the factory yard and farther. When they had all gone, the storm went with them, and the light shone on a sprinkling of dead and wounded bodies strewn about the yard. The fence and gate lay flat on the ground as did the guard shack.

Light finally came again to the factory. Men went back to work without checking in. I myself didn't make it to the gate. All of the King's men had not been in the charge. One of them on horseback approached me. He had cut off my advance toward the gate. He slipped off his white stallion and stood before me, as though looking me over. I looked him over as well. He wore a cylindrical helmet that rose to a point and sprouted a fleur-de-lys. Chainmail hung down from his helmet, covering his neck and ducking underneath the metal plating protecting his shoulders and torso. The King's emblem of a golden sun was emblazoned on his chest, surrounded by other fleur-de-lys. I noticed a broad-sword with a golden handle and silver scabbard hanging down his left side on a silver chain. I looked at his face. He had thick eyebrows, thick mustache and a thick but pointed beard that reached to the middle of his chest. There was a gleam in his eyes, and his smile showed huge horse teeth.

I didn't know what to do or say, so I blurted out, "Are you the King?" like a stupid little

boy.

He drew back and gave a hearty laugh.

“No, no, son,” he said merrily. “I am merely one of his many captains.” He paused as he placed his mailed hand upon my shoulder. “Buck, your name has come before the King. You are a very brave lad. We need men of your valor. Will you accept the King’s commission?”

My whole life flashed before me, and my mouth must have dropped open, for he closed it gently with his mailed finger. I couldn’t think of a greater honor. I wanted to say something, but couldn’t.

He lifted my chin and said, “The offer won’t be made again.”

“Yeah, yeah,” I stammered. “I mean yes, Sir! I accept.”

All I could think of was becoming a knight in shining armor, and being taught the ways of a gentleman. I would be cared for by servants the rest of my life.

“Well, then,” he exclaimed. “It will require you get on that horse with me and never look back. Can you do that?”

“What about my family?” I asked.

“What you have will never leave you,” he said.

It was a cryptic saying, but I sort of knew what he meant. I thought of my guardian angel, my Gretchen, and then my new family. My heart burned within me. I knew it was possible that I had seen them for the last time. Yet, I realized they would be in my heart always.

“Very well,” I said.

The knight in shining armor mounted his horse, reached down and gave me a hand. I grabbed hold of his wrist and he swung me onto the back of the horse. I was gliding through the

air, and I automatically straddled the horse like a pro. We galloped out of the city and into the east hills. Tents were set up everywhere ... hundreds of them ... in the same shape as the knight's helmet. Scalloped flags flew around the top rim of each tent looking like a ring of coats of arms. Some of the tents were vertically striped and some were checkered. Some were covered with fleur-de-lys. Others were of solid color, with every color of the rainbow represented. It looked like a circus had come to town.

There was one open section of the circus that looked like a corral and a parade ground because of the many horses and men fighting with swords and other things I could not fathom. There was a section with many wagons and cannon, but most of that was off to the south.

We approached a tent near the middle of the camp that was white and covered with golden sun symbols with rays like snake-daggers radiating from every sun. It was larger than all the other tents. I imagined that it would have to be the war council where all the generals would meet and talk about battles and strategies at a round table. We dismounted.

He told me, "Stay here with the horse until I return."

I thought what he was doing must be very important for him to enter that tent. The guards at the entrance saluted him with their lances, so I thought maybe he was a general.

As I stood there holding the reins, the horse nudged my shoulder, making me stumble forward. He moved me towards a water trough where he took a drink. He looked back at me with a swing of his neck and pushed at me again with his muzzle. I didn't know what to think until, stumbling backwards, my foot stepped on a canvas bag. I had an epiphany. I had a startling understanding that the horse wanted to be fed. I reached down and looked in the bag. It was a horse's feed bag, and it was half filled with oats. I lifted the bag up to him and allowed

him to put his muzzle in it and slipped the strap over his ears. He shook his head and grunted a thank you. That was a smart horse. He could communicate.

The knight came back after a while. He wasn't wearing his helmet, but carried it under his arm. Actually, I remember him taking it off just before he entered the tent. He didn't have his mail gloves on either. When he saw his horse eating, he seemed astonished and said, "I knew you would do that! You will make a fine squire!" He then looked at me kindly and put his hand on my shoulder. He said, "You can drop the reins, old Froggy there won't go anywhere. He's well trained. It's time to meet the King."

I gulped, and got a lump in my throat that matched the lumps on my head. I shook in my shoes. The whole earth seemed to be trembling beneath me.

I won't say what happened in there, except that I had audience with the King and swore my allegiance to him. I floated out of that tent with a burning fire inside me. I knew that he must be the Son of God. His love was as though we were his own children. I had never known that kind of love before. I had loved Gretchen with all my heart, but this was something far above mortal love. He was a spiritual giant. I didn't come out of that audience dry eyed.

Sir Gwynn, as I learned was the knight's name while inside, had to keep his hand on my shoulder at all times. I figured it was so I wouldn't float away. He was to be my master, and I, his squire. He had been sent into town as a spy and had seen me hose down the unionists. He told me this as we left on old Froggy. As we rode away, I kept repeating a name that had been given me so I would never forget it.

* * *

Setting up camp was the first thing I learned. I had to erect what they called a bivouac. I

unfolded and put up a tent, learned to keep a neat bed, take care of laundry, fold clothes in an exact way, pack and unpack wagons, organize the mess, that is, cook and serve the food and do the dishes, and care for the horses.

I learned more about horses than what I had ever learned on the farm at Anne and Elvin's. I had to become a veterinarian, a horse psychologist, and learn how to dress a horse in armor and keep him well groomed for parade.

I had to keep Sir Gwynn's armor and boots shiny and his sword sharp. It was his bivouac I had to take care of. I slept on the ground by his bed at his feet.

I met all the grooms and squires in the division, as we all ate together in the same mess tent. There I learned their names and the names of all the other knights and the steps for advancement to knighthood.

* * *

Two more encampments passed as I learned my duties, and then came the sword. We used sticks at first and then blanks or spades that were metal but not sharp or pointed. We were taught the use of the bayonet and hand-to-hand combat.

Within five years of maneuvers against the enemy, I became somewhat a fair swordsman, being fifth in my class. I also learned to shoot firearms, and become a sharpshooter.

I heard that the Masters didn't need to hide from bullets, but could shoo them away as flies with a special shield. I assumed it would take me twenty years or more to approach becoming brave enough to face a barrage of bullets.

By the time I was a young man of twentyone, I was taken before the King again to be tested. I passed the test of my skills and knowledge enough to be given charge of fifty men. I

put a corporal over every ten men.

We were in many skirmishes but never in any great battle. Whenever darkness gathered on the land, we were there to drive it out. However, it seemed to me that they were never dispersing, only gathering into one location into a great body of blackness and storm. The place, as I knew from the fairy tales told in my youth, was Castle Valenteen. It was beyond the southwestern border of Kingsland. Since it was close to our border, I knew there had to be a final confrontation.

It was my understanding that the King did not want this confrontation. He was willing to manage the skirmishes that came up and disperse the Unionists. It must have been a great bereavement to him, knowing that he was driving away his own people. In the two times I had seen him, he looked as if he carried all the weight of the world on his shoulders. At the same time his countenance radiated faith and confidence in overcoming the evil in his land. There was no fear in him. After having met him, I knew he loved even the Unionists.

Yet, there would be a final conflict. It was in all the legends I had heard as a boy. They spoke of the White King and the Dark King gathering all their forces together for the one final battle.

I wondered why the King didn't go against Castle Valenteen before their forces grew too large? Go now while it was easily destroyed. I even asked Sir Gwynn, our Division Head. He said that it would not prove to be fair play if we hit our enemy when he was weak, that it was the knight's way to be equally matched, and that was why we were driving the Unionists into one place. "The King is no bully," he said. "He only fights to protect his own."

Chapter Eleven

The Final Assault

There came a time when the King's men had visited the whole of Kingsland and had driven the Unionists before them until talk of Unionism was diminished. The King proved that he would provide and care for his own. He rebuilt factories and mines, making safer working conditions and providing needed health insurance and workers compensation and replaced corrupt bosses and managers who were robbing the workers of their pensions and provided for drought relief in farming communities. He made it clear in all parts of the land, whether it was industrial or pastoral, that all complaints should come before the King instead of being kept behind closed doors to brew into a conflict. He showed his compassion wherever he went. He would no longer keep to himself.

There was only one place he did not go, and that was to the plain of Goremon, "the plain of beasts," at the foot of Castle Valenteen.

No matter where we were in the land, we had but to look over to the southwest to see black clouds roiling over the horizon. Sometimes we were so far away that it looked like only a black spot in the sky, but it was still a noticeable blemish to our land.

On our marches, we gathered up every garrison and posted division. Our forces increased as did the enemy's. Each soldier and knight wore a solemn face, at attention, listening for that final call, a call so desperate in which we knew that only a handful out of millions would survive the conflict. It would be a call to die for King and country.

Days on end I heard the monotonous sound of armor clanking, marching feet tromping the ground, the rhythm of wagon wheels rolling, clanking sounds from the chuck wagons, moaning from a thousand oxen pulling the thunderous juggernauts, wagons so big that men marched underneath to keep out of the sun. On these we kept our supplies and war cannon. On some were small cities where the war captains kept their offices to make their plans. One was the King's palace. Our strength was as a whole nation on the move.

Purple mountains surrounded us to the east and to the west as we moved south down a wide valley towards the incessant roiling wall of blackness rising to the top of the atmosphere like a whirlwind.

We moved through low lying hills and into a green valley beneath blue hazy mountains. There were several passes through these mountains into the next valley, Goremon. The mention of the name sent chills up my spine.

Our forces split up, trailing into each of these passes. I found myself camped at the opening of the westernmost canyon. Peering through the canyon, I could imagine a large mouth with jagged teeth ready to swallow us. There was a bridge that spanned the opening of the canyon that looked like a nose, lip and teeth. The canyon walls appeared as a narrowing throat that dropped into darkness.

My men seemed unafraid. Each man knew for whom he fought, had met him personally as he had called each of them by name.

I stared at the stars to the north with wonder until late at night and then fell into a fitful sleep. I had dark dreams. A couple of times, I woke with a jerk, thinking the Dark Lord had a hold of my throat. I couldn't scream! I had to look around to see where I was, to get my

bearings. I sweated profusely. I was reassured by the campfires and the guards and sleeping men. Still, the stars were only in half the sky as the encroaching storm crept ever closer.

* * *

Morning came and breakfast went, and we all stood on our feet ready to march into the canyon. We waited for the blast of the long brass trumpets.

Finally, the trumpets split the air! The command of “Men advance!” was heard. It came from my own mouth, as though it had been another’s. I heard hundreds of other captains giving the same command echoing through the valley, all shouting in unison.

We marched into the cave-like canyon with its roof of blackness. The walls of the cave were red with pink and white striations undulating like waves of the sea. The darkness in front of us receded farther into the canyon as we pushed forward. It was as though a light went before us, dispersing the darkness. I was reminded of the factory at home when the King’s men went after the Unionists. As they charged through the factory yard, they were as headlights on an automobile that chased away the dark clouds. Or was it the Unionists that pulled the darkness along with them?

When we got near the opening into the next valley, little impish men jumped down off the faces of the canyon walls. Having razor sharp teeth, they slashed the King’s men about their faces and necks, and on their legs and arms if they didn’t have armor. The dwarfs were smeared with paint the same design and color as the walls of the canyon, so they had been nearly invisible and completely unnoticed. We all drew our swords and started slashing back. Instead of halting the columns we raced forward to get out of the canyon and into the clearing so we

could do better at defending ourselves. The little imps were bouncing everywhere. I slew one myself as it jumped out at me. It was light and followed the swing of my sword to the ground where it got trampled by our horses. I saw ten men go down, but no more.

Sir Gwynn led the way into the clearing at a slow gallop, and the black wall retreated before him. I saw the roiling of dark bodies and horse hoofs rearing up within the black shadows. When all the troops had passed through the canyon, we formed a bubble of light within the darkness. Sir Gwynn organized us into our battalions and divisions along the perimeter of the mountain until we were joined by the other troops to the east. Then all of the mountain that lay behind us was lit up with our light. All the King's men were ready to charge. The trumpets blew a long shrill blast that echoed against the mountain, and the charge was in full advance. The King took the force of light into the valley.

My mare was met by a black horse with a black knight atop her. Both horses reared up and our swords clashed and clanged and sparks flew. I was amazed at the strength of his blows. I felt the hatred, as hot breath blew into my face with obscene snarling. At one point, his sword slid along the edge of mine and was coming near my neck. In an instant, I twisted my wrist as the sword master taught me, and the tip of my sword plunged into his throat. He slumped back, and his horse returned to the darkness.

I reared up and called, "Come on, men!" and raced forward, not knowing who or what followed. I encountered strange creatures whose heads or helmets were that of boars and apes and bulls with large thick horns. They all had tremendous teeth. They jumped on me from all directions and pulled me down from my horse and started biting my arms and legs and slashing at me with swords and scimitars. I whacked at them with my sword and shot at them with my

pistol, and they just kept coming. I saw some of my men fighting them off. I shouted all the encouraging words in my vocabulary, and fought as fiercely as I could, and we were, after long hours, able to gain some ground.

Lightning and thunder and cold hurricane force winds blew at my chest. I forced my body forward. The sound of trumpets faded into the distance as though I was being left behind in the darkness, and I couldn't find my horse. My sword arm was feeling like jelly. I had to slice through so many black tar babies just to advance one foot. But by degrees, I felt that we were making progress. Even so, the continual blows to my body, head, and arms proved to be almost fatal. Once I lost my helmet, I lost all consciousness from a blow to my unprotected head. A bright flash of light was the last thing I remembered.

* * *

Was I dreaming or was the battle over? I lay on the ground frozen in stark terror. I heard only the stillness. When strength returned, I checked my limbs, hands and feet, and my head. I rose to my hands and knees. Was it night or was I still in that black thick fog in which we had been fighting? When I went to move, I could feel dead bodies of men and imps everywhere. I couldn't see, and I shuddered. It was the blackest thing I had ever experienced. I may have been in a cave, but it didn't sound right. I tried standing up. Pain exploded in my head. I hurt over every inch of my body, as if I had been trampled by horses. I walked slowly, lethargically. Every step I took, my feet landed on someone's arm or leg or chest. The stench of carrion was overpowering. I choked at each breath. I tied my kerchief about my face, but it didn't help much.

I had lost my sword, my dagger and my pistol. I found a sword sticking up from the ground. I thought I would pull it out and carry it with me, but when I pulled, it made such an awful sucking noise that it made my skin crawl. That wasn't the ground it was stuck in.

Anger rose up from my heart. I shouted every swear word I had ever heard. Images of Gretchen filled my vision. They killed her. All the demons I had been fighting killed her. The Dark Lord killed her and I hated him for it. I would search him out and destroy him. I lifted my sword and practiced slicing his head off. There it was, I imagined, right in front of me. I threw my head back and laughed as loud as I could. Oh, the pain! I dropped the sword and held my aching head.

I walked forward in the darkness. My eyes hurt from squinting to see. After a while, the bodies became sparse and phosphorescent. I could even see the bodies of horses glowing in the dark, not brightly, but I could make them out as patches of green light. The dead grew farther and farther apart the longer I walked, but the stench wasn't getting any easier to bear.

I took my armor off. I understood that the battle was over. I couldn't hear any noise. I became aware of my own stench of blood and sweat. I think I was bleeding inside my mouth. I had to swallow blood every now and then. The taste was alarmingly wonderful.

Darkness ... impenetrable darkness ... was never ending. In every short breath I cursed the darkness for Gretchen's sake. I asked myself, when would the dawn come, and why weren't there any stars? I became so tired from the loss of blood that I dropped to the ground. As I passed out, I could feel clean grass the length and sweep of my arms, and I called out, "Gretchen!"

I awoke to more darkness. In my dreaming, there hadn't been any light. Did I sleep all

day and wake up at night? The dawn never came as I sat there listening to my stomach growl. I remembered that I had a sack of smoked fish tied to my belt, but I had thrown it away with my armor. I got up and walked on.

The constant smell of a dead rat, as though someone had tied one around my neck, made me cry out “Oh God!” but no one heard. Nothing moved. I kept walking for hours or days, I didn’t know which. At one point, there was darkness on top of darkness that caught up with me. It grunted and startled me. I jerked around looking for my sword. It was gone, so I swung at the filthy thing. I twirled around with the momentum and fell down. I panicked, got up, and ran. The dark thing ran beside me. Fear, stark naked fear, bolted me forward like a cannon. I couldn’t feel the ground as I ran, only the wind.

I became aware that I was in a forest. I wasn’t running anymore, and my eyes had gotten used to the dark. I could make out trees and bushes and all kinds of undergrowth, but I hadn’t bumped into anything. I couldn’t get that out of my mind. I couldn’t understand it. It wasn’t logical. I had been running through this forest and hadn’t touched a thing.

In the distance, I could see a light as though it could be a campfire. I thought maybe it was a camp of the enemy, but somehow it gave me hope. It was light. I walked towards it.

Chapter Twelve

The Prisoner

Walking through the forest, getting closer to the fire, I saw it was not a camp of any kind, but a small cottage. The fire I had seen was a yellowish light coming from a window on the right side of the door.

Approaching the gate of the cottage, my eyes were fixed upon the orange and yellow glow. I could smell the damp moldy bricks and rotting paper and wood. The ground outside was bare, and the two trees I saw had no leaves. It must have been winter but without the freezing cold. I got a good whiff of the acrid smell of human flesh that has never known a bath, and then the foul stench of human waste.

“Oh good grief!” I shuddered as I bolted backward! Suddenly an old woman stood right in front of me, just beyond the gate. She must have been there the whole time looking at me, but I hadn’t noticed. All my hair stood on end at the sight of her. Wave after wave of fear flowed from her presence like a wind of electricity.

I gathered all my strength and asked, “Where am I? What is this place?”

She responded with a cackle, “You are home, Sonny. You are home at last!” I thought for sure she was an old witch from the fairy tales I had heard as a child. She opened her arms and cackled again. “Come, come ... come on in.”

She had such power over me. I stood there not able to move. She touched me, reaching across the gate. I couldn’t stand it! I scraped my contorted face with my fingernails and ran

away screaming. I ran as far away as I could, but I found that I had run in a circle and had come back to the horror of her open arms and her cackling voice.

She looked and smelled like a human corpse, standing there in front of that little cottage that had ceased to be a home long ages ago. Her face was wrinkled like a prune. She wore a black dress and held a black shawl about her head against the wind.

I felt numb from the fear. I just kept walking. There was a strange effect as in a dream. She stared at me. Her eyes kept following me like a picture hung on a wall of someone looking straight ahead, but the eyes follow you. She didn't move, and she just kept whispering my name "Starbuck, Starbuck, Starbuck." I knew I was walking forward, but there she was, always in front of me, moving along with me, as when the moon seems to follow you in the night as you travel along in a car or a train. The more I walked the more numb I became. The old witch finally faded from consciousness.

I felt dead and walked on without cognizance of time. Walking through the dark wasn't something I did anymore, it became a state of being, something that I was. I don't remember ever thinking or doing anything ... just walking in the dark.

After a long while, something whispered to me from the back of my mind, but I couldn't pay attention to it. I couldn't focus on it. I walked on as one hypnotized, walking like a zombie. It was more like a feeling creeping up my spine. The feeling turned to fear, and the fear formed into words in my mind. It said, "Turn Back!" But I had no will to turn back. The warning was empty. It was only a passing thought. The fear grew into sobbing, tears, and trembling, and the grasping at my contorted face, the laughter of the mad, for my legs made no sense of it and kept on walking. It was as if a black hand had a hold of me and drew me forward.

My feet found stairs. They were pulled up the stairs. I went forever upward, twisting and turning through forbidden passageways haunted by black demons. I screamed, but no voice came from my mouth.

The passageways smelled of rotting brick and mold. The walls were slimy to the touch. The damp air was cold, stone cold in my bones. I felt the dampness gathering in my lungs, and I couldn't cough enough. I had weird dreams of living in Anne and Elvin's house. It was empty of people. I was alone there. I searched, but there was nobody. I dreamed of that witch in the forest. She said she was my true mother, and I hated her. I dreamed of a tall empty house in the middle of a lake that was accessed only by walking down a long pier. She was there waiting for me.

Waking up didn't mean anything. When I opened my eyes, I was in a room, but there was only darkness. When I lay down and went to sleep, there was only darkness. I had no reference. I didn't know how big the room was. I only knew I was on a cobbled stone floor, or maybe a street by the way it felt. I never knew how long I slept or how long I was awake.

Each time I thought I was conscious, I crawled on my hands and knees to find a wall, but trembled at the thought of reaching out with a hand for what I might find.

. I was a prisoner, perhaps in a tower.

One day - that was only a guess, not being able to tell day or night - I finally reached a wall. It was concave horizontally, proving my earlier suspicions. I was indeed in a tower ... *in a room at the top of a tower*. I felt for a window. There should be a window. I would let in the light, I thought. But moving around the room, following the wall, falling asleep sometimes, I found nothing. I didn't know if I had passed by the same place twice. Not only was there no

window, there was no door. *Not a tower ... a pit!*

It was eternal night, and always shivering cold. Sometimes I would touch my sore sobbing eyelids to see if they were shut or open.

Darkness takes on a personality of its own. I could imagine sometimes there was a man standing just beyond my reach. If I stared long enough, I would see his silhouette. He was just a little darker than the darkness around me that I breathed like smoke. It was his perfume, the dark smoke, and I could feel his power that clutched at my throat. I feared breathing lest he notice me. The darkness emanated from *him*. He magnified all my fears. He was the source of the dark cloud I had seen surrounding the Unionists. He was the devil incarnate. My hair stood on end every time he entered the room, and I froze. I dared not shiver, sniffle, or breathe.

I clearly felt the power that made me a prisoner. I knew there had to be a door to the room. He had brought me to this place. Maybe I had been let down from the ceiling. I had heard of prisons like that. I knew he wouldn't let me out. He would let me rot. But the power I felt coming from him also sustained me. I had neither eaten nor drunk anything since my entrance into the darkness. I had only breathed in the power of rottenness and hatred. That was his power ... infinite hatred, and I hated him in return. I hated him and feared him ... and thus he kept me a prisoner. There may have been a door. I hoped there would be a door, but in my hate, hating the hate, it was inaccessible. The loathing stole my power to find it or open it.

The air was filled with malice. I feared that if I turned this way or that, I would meet him, and I could not. It would tear my soul apart, and I would scream for an eternity. He was the Boogeyman under the bed magnified a thousand times. Before I met Gretchen, I would cringe under the covers at night, too afraid to let out even one finger or toe. Now my imagined

nightmares had been realized, and I was in his awful grasp. One time the thought of Gretchen came to my mind, and *He* showed up and looked at me, and all I could do was scream, the kind without sound. My love for Gretchen had been turned into hate for him, hating him for taking her away from me. Or did I hate God for doing that? Wasn't it all the same?

There was no escape. Every time I tried to think, my thoughts were turned into little grotesque figures that mocked me and taunted me, driving me to think not at all. I had to sit there against the wall, feeling my bones and flesh wasted away, spitting out teeth now and then and trying to weep, but there were no more tears.

One day I dreamed that the tower or pit I was in was an empty theater. It was completely dark, but I found a door and opened it. I found myself in a hallway. As I walked down the hall I noticed a couple of offices. Somehow they seemed familiar. I entered a lobby with a curved convex wall. I followed it around until I came to a double door. I pushed my way in and found an auditorium with nice cushioned seats that folded up when no one sat in them. I tried out the seats. They were too comfortable and made me feel guilty. I got up and felt the concrete floor. I wandered down the sloping floor to the stage. I found an exit door to the right of the stage, and pushing through, found myself back in my prison cell with no way out. Was I awake or asleep? I still couldn't tell. But I would have this dream over and over, and each time, I would get farther into the hallway that led to outside. At one point, I found a street door. The only thing that stopped me from opening it was the abiding evil presence ever watching me. I was sure that if I opened the door, there still would only be darkness. So like an obedient pet, I always returned to my cell.

His presence everywhere soon dissolved my roaming spirit, and I sat in the darkness. If

thoughts of other people came into my mind, he would be there to punish me by his incessant stare, making me sob. Was I his only prisoner? I had never known the presence of anyone else unless it were a goblin that came to torture me, biting me and stretching me all out of shape. Sometimes I would be eaten and wake up with a start only to find something scarier. His presence ... the Dark Lord.

I had only one thing left to me, and that was my fear. That was my life now. He was remaking me in his image. I was the darkness now. He was bending me to his will, and obviously, to do his will. If he let me go, I would be a black knight riding a black horse, not caring if I hated and killed everyone.

Once on Anne and Elvin's farm, Fred had caught a ground squirrel and cut its chest open with his six inch blade pocket knife. He watched its heartbeat. Later that day, he came back to see if it was still alive. He lifted it up and opened it. It's heart, just barely beating, he laughed and threw it away. I felt like that's what the devil was doing with me. When my heart stopped beating, he would laugh and throw me away, but I knew he never laughs, and when my heart stopped, I would be his.

For a long time I only stared into the darkness. Then I began living my life over and seeing everything happen as though it were a movie. I saw myself leaving Anne and Elvin's and living with Gretchen and her family, working in the factory, being drafted into the army and ending up staring into the darkness. This movie would repeat time after time, over and over until I was getting tired of the whole thing. I never knew what to think of it. It was just something for me to do, I guess. Funny, he didn't stop me.

I did learn that I wasn't singular and that I wasn't someone special. I hadn't been singled

out for suffering. There were many ranch hands that had lost their jobs and wound up in the King's service. Other men had gone hungry and others had lost loved ones. Many men told me their stories as they were picked up by the King's men and recruited. Many had been wounded in battle. Some lost their lives. I saw that now. I was no one special. But I seemed to be the only prisoner. I didn't even notice a rat or a cockroach.

Chapter Thirteen

End of the War and My Release

It felt as though years had passed. Sores covered my entire body. I had no more teeth. My tongue swelled up. I got dizzy when I tried to stand. My belly protruded, and I hurt all over. I stank and loathed myself. I couldn't think without my head hurting.

Before I died, the end came. It was like waking up just before the dawn, though I had never closed my eyes. The darkness wasn't black anymore. It was gray and lighter and lighter. Something was gone. *He* was gone. I could not feel his presence. It got light enough to look around. Blinking my eyes, I saw a large wooden door slightly ajar. He didn't bother shutting it when he left.

After much effort and a lot of deep breaths, I stood. I was able to sustain myself somewhat, and looking around the small tower room, I wondered why I hadn't been able to even feel the door before. Even in the darkness, I could feel the wall, but never a door. Maybe *he* had kept it from me.

I painfully walked through the door and stumbled down cement steps to a large empty room. I crossed it. There were no furnishings or decorations. I found what may have been a suite of offices.

The place was empty because *he* wasn't here. Every time I came to a door or turned a corner, chills traveled up and down my spine because I was afraid I would run into *him*, but he was never there. I thought how strange to be without him. Even the hatred I had felt was gone. I

had no more feelings except that my hair stood on end every time I entered a new room, expecting *him*.

I passed through hallways and passageways until I found a glass window. I looked outside. It was dawn. Red purple clouds announced the sun was about to rise over the mountains.

I heard bugles and sobbed. It was the King's men. I started towards what I thought to be an open door, trying to call out. Only a hoarse cry came. I came to a large picture window, the kind you see in storefronts. Again, I couldn't find a door. Maybe I was so attracted to the light that I only saw the window.

I heard a woman scream. It wasn't me, I assured myself. No, it wasn't me. I didn't make that sound. I looked through the window at crowd below, but something caught my attention and made me change focus. I saw before me a naked skeleton covered with skin. It had long scraggly hair and a long thin beard. I gazed at it for a while and felt sorry for it. At last, I had seen another prisoner. I tried to touch him. He raised his hand up and touched mine, but it felt like glass. I had placed my hand on a window. When I realized it was only a reflection of me, I gasped.

I stood for some time looking at myself until I realized there was movement outside. I left the window and searched again for a door the only way I knew how. I felt along the wall instead of relying on my eyes. I came to a large wooden door. It opened easily. I heard screams and astonished cries and saw people, men and women gathered along the street. I saw soldiers marching. Someone said, "Look over there at the Valenteen Theater, on the steps. It's a ghoul!" People came running toward me, and I fainted.

* * *

A memory came to me as if it had been a cool breeze blowing over me. I had ascended up a stone staircase, and I knew that if I were to rejoin the King's men, I would have to travel down that same staircase and go into the valley where I had seen their tents. I tried, but my legs would not take me. They trembled, and I fell down the stairs.

I woke up with a jerk! I was lying in a soft feather bed with a white canvas tent over me. A warm woolen blanket covered my bones. A cool breeze was blowing.

I looked around and saw other beds with men lying in them and a bottle of serum attached to what I thought was a shepherd's crook. A rubber tube ran from it to a needle in my arm. I looked at it for a long time. It was evident that there had been several attempts to put that needle into my vein. It felt sore. My bones hurt. All of me hurt. *Of course*, I thought, *that is good. I am alive.*

I counted about 50 beds around me. There must have been less. I guess I counted several of them twice or more. It was hard to concentrate. There was a smell of alcohol and urine. It made me woozy. I heard men moaning. There were many with bandages about various parts of their body. Some looked dead or asleep. There were some sitting at desks writing letters or memoirs. There were some without arms or legs. I saw a lone man sitting in a wheelchair rolling down the middle aisle. His left leg had been amputated just above the knee.

"Ah!" said the man in the wheelchair. "The human skeleton has awakened."

I looked at the man and began to weep. It was Allen. I had known him since childhood when I worked on Anne and Elvin's farm and then in the foundry at Throughsome.

"I never did join that union," he said. "What happened to you? You look like you haven't

eaten since the last day I saw you.”

“Allen?” I asked hoarsely. “Allen? Is that you?”

“You recognize me, Little Buck? Ow!” He grabbed his head as he approached my bed. “Got to talk softly.” He started again near a whisper, “I got this one big head ache. Never goes away.”

Allen reached over behind him to a tray overhanging an empty bed and got a glass of water and a pill. He took that, and I started telling my story beginning with a long walk. I don’t finishing it. I must have gone back to sleep. My body was not yet functioning well on its own. After having been sustained by the darkness, I had to get used to taking in fluids and nourishment.

When I received more strength, I could talk to Allen.

After a long silence, which may have been sleep, I turned my head towards where Allen had been. He was no longer in his wheelchair, but sitting up in bed reading, something I had never before seen him do.

“Allen?” I asked, “Are you a soldier for the King?”

He turned towards me, resting his book on his chest and said, “Yessiree, true an’ blue, that’s me!” He gazed up at the ceiling. “It’s funny how I joined up,” he said. “You remember that day the King’s men came to drive out the Unionists?”

“Yes,” I said.

“Well, I was running down the yard near the foundry because I was being chased by horses. Everyone was running away ... running faster than me. I was sure I was for the Union, but as I looked at that black cloud ahead of me and realizing I was headed right for it ... well,

the fact is, I just wasn't angry! I think that's what stopped me. I wasn't angry. I was for the Union and all that, but why be angry? You know how lighthearted I am. Why, I can do a lot of barking, but I'm a noble old dog wagging its tail in delight of the light and life. Darkness? I can't stand it except to look at the moon and the stars with a girl in my arms. Well, anyway, I stopped and stood there looking at that black cloud, asking myself if I really wanted to go into that. I turned around and looked at the King's men running all around me, chasing that cloud. I wasn't afraid of them. I saw light in them.

“There I was being surrounded by the King's men. One of them turned back and put a sword to my throat. ‘Having second thoughts?’ he asked. Right then, I felt really peaceful. I smiled, and he smiled and put his sword away. ‘Sorry,’ he said, ‘Thought you were a Unionist.’ ‘Not me,’ I said. ‘You a fighter?’ he said. I told him I could throw a mean punch. ‘Want to come with us? We need good men like you,’ he said. I had no second thoughts. I said ‘Yes’ and he gave me his hand. He lifted me up on his steed and we rode off to camp. I got trained to fight, went off to war and wound up here with part of a leg gone.

“Say,” he said. “I learned something,” as if he were apologizing.

“What's that?” I asked.

“What the Unionists were doing.”

“What was that?” I asked again.

“They had some legitimate complaints ... some about working conditions and all that, but the King already had a program in place to take care of anyone who lost his job or who wasn't getting paid enough, or who got sick or injured and couldn't work. None of that was new that they were spouting off. What they were really doing was trying to get people to own their own

lands and property when it was already owned by the King. But even that was not quite right. That's what they said, but they were also saying that the Union would eventually own all the land and then every one would be working for the Union and the King would be dethroned. They weren't espousing democracy after all, or capitalism. They were pure socialists. That's why the King was after them. They wanted to dethrone him and set themselves up in his place, owning all that he owns. It was just one king trying to dethrone another, even though the second king wouldn't be a single person, but it would have had the same results. Except I don't think the bureaucracy that would have resulted would have been as compassionate as the King.

"I found something else," he said, leading me on.

"What was that?" I asked.

"I found out that Anne and Elvin never did own their farm. It works like this. You put in a request. The King gives you a plot of land with a contract that you will take care of it, and whatever you grow or raise, you have to give back the increase. That's where the food or other things you buy at the store comes from. Either that, or it's given to the poor."

That was interesting to me. I wondered why I had never heard that. I guess I was never interested. There was a lot I was never interested in, only in living my life and working or fighting in the War.

"Now tell me how you got here," he implored.

I told him what had happened to me, and how I came to be a captain, and then told him how I got lost and wound up in the castle as a prisoner. All he could say was "Wow!" We exchanged war stories until I got so exhausted I passed out.

In the days of healing, Allen and I talked about what we would do when we got out. He told me that he had been in touch with Anne and Elvin. The drought had eased up and they needed him back. He thought he would go back to the farm and take over because they were getting old and couldn't take care of the place any longer. I asked him how he would do it without a leg. He showed me one day by prancing about on a new leg the army had given him. He wanted me to come with him back to the farm, but I couldn't make up my mind. I was getting homesick for my hole in the ground and Gretchen's parents. But I didn't think very much about Gretchen any more. I didn't think very much at all. I either meditated or slept when I wasn't talking to Allen.

The day came when they released Allen. I was just on the verge of regaining my strength enough to get out of bed and walk around. I was started on solid food and was gaining weight.

I sat on the edge of my bed when Allen came in to say goodbye.

"Well, Buck," he said, "When you get strong enough to leave the camp, come out to the farm if you have a mind to. There will always be a place for you."

I told him I would if I could make up my mind. If I had a desire to do anything, it would probably be in a wide open space with lots of natural sun light.

I told him, "But for right now, I'll stay with the corps and take my orders from here."

"All right," he said, giving me a firm handshake. "Get well." With that, he left, and I held my sore hand to my chest.

We had discussed all our days on the farm at Anne and Elvin's and all our days working in the foundry. We had depleted all our experiences of the Great War and all our ideas about the philosophy of life, but there was one haunting thing we never discussed ... that was whatever

had happened to Fred. Whenever I asked, Allen changed the subject. I imagined the worst. Either he had been killed by the King's men or he had joined the darkness and then was killed by the King's men.

I wondered about Bo also, but I never asked Allen.

Now that I was well enough to venture outside, the day nurse had the habit of wheeling me outside in the same wheelchair Allen had used. I loved the smell of the horses and cattle and the nearby pines. To be able to breathe the fresh air was a tremendous medicine. I felt stronger each day, but the doctor gave me orders to be wheeled over to physical therapy. It wasn't a vacation I was on, he told me. That's where I ran into Nurse Bojensen ... and I could only stare. It had been a long time since she tried to seduce me back in Throughsome, and she had grown into a beautiful woman.

She could only see me out of the corner of her eye as she was busily massaging a fellow soldier. He was half naked and she was rubbing his back with deliciously smelling aromatic oils. Her black hair was done up underneath her white nurse's cap, and her dark skin clashed with her white nurse's uniform. It was tight and showed her figure well. I was in love all over again.

She said, "I'll be with you in a moment." Then she told the other nurse, "Just leave his chart on the desk."

I looked around. There were other tables, and there were weight lifting machines and double bars held off the floor to help men walk. I thought I would be using that to get strength into my legs.

She talked to the other soldier for a while, helped him get dressed and on his feet then

sent him on his way. He walked over to the weight and started working out. She turned around and saw me staring at her. She stared at me and then laughed joyously, clapping her hands out in front of her like a little girl.

“Buck! What in the...I hardly recognized you! Why, you’re so skinny. What happened to you?”

She pulled a stool over to me and sat down. “I guess they recruit anybody, don’t they?” she said, still amazed. “You know Allen is here!” she said excitedly.

“Was here,” I said. “Left yesterday.”

“He ...” she said, looking startled for a moment. Her face grew stern as she tried to hold back the tears that came, and then she smiled, wiped her face with her fingers, looked away and said, “He forgot to say goodbye. Never mind. Let’s look at your chart.”

She reached over my shoulder to get my chart on the desk behind me. Her face and soft neck and breasts came an inch from my face. I gasped and wanted to grab her and hold her tightly against my body, but instead of doing that, I melted.

She looked at me after settling back onto her stool and asked, “What?”

I said, “Oh, just nostalgia, I guess.”

“You were thinking of when you were a little boy.”

“I was thinking of you in the nude, like when you were having a painting done.”

“Oh, those days of modeling are over. I have more important things to do now. Let’s have a look at you ... I mean your chart.”

She acted as though I disturbed her a little, but not as much as I must have acted towards her. She tried to show me a regimen of exercises to do on the exercise bars and on the mats to

improve my strength, but I was distracted and often dizzy in her presence, so much so that she had to repeat what she said several times.

Every other day I would spend an hour or two with Bo. We weren't always alone, and I'm sure she appreciated that. I showed too much attention to her, and she could plainly see that. She saw me naked enough when she would bathe me or massage me all over. She said that she was balancing the scales since I had seen her naked quite often in the studios. It didn't help my desires for her ... only increased them.

She remarked that it was nice to see old friends again when she was massaging my back and hips. We both laughed.

Bo was a different person. She had always been somber, dark and mysterious. Now there was a light in her eyes and a glow about her person, and I wished it was because of me, but I saw that in her with all the soldiers. She was genuinely happy. She was almost angelic, but when she rubbed me down with those scented oils and massaged my muscles, I felt like we were having sex. One time I broke down and wept. She immediately noticed and lay down beside me. I grabbed her and sobbed away into her bosom. I held her as tightly as I could. She gave me a big hug and we kissed. She held me tightly and said, "Buck, this isn't what you want, and I can't give it to you. I can give you my love, but not like this. I'm a different woman now, and you're all grown up. You're different. You're not unlikable, nor unlovable. Someday you will meet a younger girl who will be just right for you."

She was a few years older than me, and I guess more mature. I'm sure she wanted a more mature man to be with, but I wanted her so bad I couldn't think straight. It would become awkward when we were together. I would grab her arm. We would look at each other, and she

would change the subject and tell me to do this or that exercise. It got to the point where we didn't do much but talk of the old times back in Throughsome.

Chapter Fourteen

My Discharge

Within the three months, I stayed in hospital getting my exercise, eating properly, receiving greater strength, and doing much talking, I got to know Bo's story. She was devastated by the war, raped by people who were supposed to be her friends, causing her to drink and get into fights and destroy other people's property just for fun. A lot of art was senselessly slashed or broken to bits and smashed because of quarrels and arguments. She saw people murdered out of drunken rage. There was no sense to life anymore. A dark cloud hung over the towers, and she experienced the terror of being molested by demons and evil spirits. Besides the fighting, bombs were set off, destroying the towers. She was found half naked and starving by the King's men and taken to the hospital. There, through her recovery, she started helping people. Then she met the King, who came to the hospital to visit the sick and injured. He had taken her by the hands and looked into her eyes. She said that she had never known such a love and light in anyone, and it filled her whole soul. She experienced true joy and yearned for something spiritual in her life. She seemed to float the rest of that day. Now, serving others, she found a love inside she never knew she had. Never mind that she was treated with love and kindness without the pretense she was used to, she wanted to show love and kindness to others in the hospital. She slowly found her way into Rehabilitation and decided that was her calling, so she remained there.

Bo decided that was the way she could help in the Great War, a way to bring light back into the faces of those who had met the darkness. She wanted to share what she saw in the King.

She was sent from one hospital to another, until near the end of the war she wound up in the plain of Goremon on the south of the City of Valenteen.

* * *

When I became strong enough to be discharged from the hospital, I wouldn't go. I kept visiting Bo. I would interrupt her work, talking to her very rapidly about nothing. I would visit her after work in her quarters, and every time we were alone, I would force her to kiss me. She acted as though she had no resistance. I never saw the tears in her eyes.

After several days of this, I guess about a week, I went to Rehabilitation early in the morning to see her. When I saw she wasn't there, I went to her quarters. She wasn't there either. I went to the pharmacy, the infirmary, the mess, the canteen, the showers, everywhere I could think she might be. Then I went to the head nurse and asked if she knew where Nurse Bojensen was. She said that she had been transferred. I felt my face turn ashen, felt all the blood flow from my head and fainted. When I woke up, I was in a different ward. There were no soldiers here with bandages. Some were tied to their beds either screaming or mumbling.

An officer came in everyday and talked to me. He said, "A lot of men here get attached to a nurse and fall in love." I didn't want to listen to him. He didn't seem to know what he was talking about. This wasn't any nurse. This was Bo. She was a link to my past ... a link to my identity. When I didn't have her, I didn't have myself. I was gone. I would just sit in bed and stare and not think of anything. I didn't know what was going on around me. I was never hungry and would not eat. They had to put me back on plasma. I was only hungry for Bo. I would cry her name out in my sleep where I would return to that dark castle prison. Although I couldn't find my old master, the darkness was still there ... the darkness of loneliness.

Night after night would be the same nightmare. Every day the same officer would come and want to talk to me about my feelings and thoughts. I didn't have any, only a hunger for Bo. One day I got so tired of it all I cried out, "Oh God!" and wanted to die. I passed out. I was back in that sinister tower. "Oh no!" I cried, and just sat there and sobbed.

After awhile, after I released all the tears, I could hear voices and the scurry of feet. I became frightened and started looking around to see if I could see anything. I saw a pinpoint of light. It was so wonderful, I was sure it was the way out. I got up and ran towards it. It was a long way off, but it kept getting closer and growing brighter. As I approached the light, I realized there was a person standing just outside in a garden filled with the most wonderfully scented flowers. The person was a little girl, and I was a boy again running towards her open arms. I recognized her.

"Gretchen! Gretchen!" I called.

As she embraced me, I felt whole again. I felt the joy and love we had together living under the hill in Throughsome. She kissed away all my tears, and I actually felt happy again.

She said, "I'll always be here for you Buck. Always."

I woke up laughing joyously. I felt relieved. I didn't have any more compulsion towards Bo. I knew my place. My strength was back. I sat up in bed and smiled at the doctor and the nurses that stood around. They had some kind of instruments in their hands, but I wasn't interested in that.

The doctor returned my smile and asked "What happened?"

"My angel told me everything is all right," I said.

"You are ready for therapy now," he said. "I want you to come to my office as soon as I

am through here with these other soldiers.”

* * *

The sessions I had with the doctor were enlightening. The light I found with Gretchen was expanded in that doctor’s office. I told him of my repeated dream, and through hypnosis, he helped me to walk around in that dream.

He asked, “What do you see?”

“There is an office down the hall. It seems to be above an entryway into a theater. I have always opened that door and looked in. It seems very familiar. I think this is where the financial books were kept as well as where they ordered all kinds of media.”

“Have you been down there in the theater?” he asked, tapping a pencil against his chin.

“Yes,” I said with a start. “There is someone else in there. He’s sweeping the place. I never noticed him before.”

“Take a good long look at this person. Tell me, if you can, who he is. Do you recognize him.”

I gasped. “Why, it’s me!”

“Now,” said the doctor, writing in his notebook, “I want you to go into the lobby. Go outside and look around. See if you can see the name of the theater.”

I walked out the door and looked up at the neon sign that hung vertically over the door. It must have been two stories high. “It says Valenteen. It’s the Valenteen Theater. I think I went here with Bo one time.”

* * *

In one session we concentrated on Bo. I told him all about her, seeing her at the cafe

where all those girls bothered me, wanting me to drink with them. I remembered they had live bands. I thought she had been one of the girls, and then I found out she was an artist's model. But my dream changed slightly, and I told the doctor, "I see Bo dressed up in an old-time soldier's uniform. It's red, and she's wearing a flat round hat with a chin strap. She's running around calling people's names, giving them messages, or seating them in the theater. That's odd," I said, trying to remember something.

"What's that?" he asked, biting the eraser on the end of the pencil.

"In my dream, we are both working there. I work in the office, and she works on the floor."

"Is this where you met Bojensen?"

"No!" I said, screwing up my face. "You are confusing me."

"How is that?" He looked down at his notes and wrote something.

"I remember meeting Bo at the towers. But in my dreams, I met her in the theater."

* * *

My dreams changed. Instead of being in the Castle Valenteen, I was in the Valenteen Theater, working there along with Bo. I walked all through the theater, through all the hallways and offices. There was even a small library. I discovered that the building was a suite of media outlets, one of them being the theater. In my dreams my hair used to stand on end when I approached any corner or any door, expecting the dark lord to be one step away. But I eventually stopped feeling that. It became an old memory, and as the nights went by, I forgot him completely, seeing only the building, but neither I nor Bo was working there anymore. I only saw strangers, as if they had invaded my dream and taken over.

At one point in my therapy the doctor took me to town, and we toured the Valenteen Theater. It seemed to be opened again and was in full repair, as it had been damaged in the war. The people were kind to me and greeted me by name. I thought they were just being polite, then I met the owner, a short balding man with a black mustache and round black glasses. He reminded me of a cartoon character I had seen before ... in that theater.

“Well, Starbuck,” he said, stretching out his hand.

I shook hands with him and said, “Feeling a lot better now.”

“When you are fully recovered,” he said, smiling, “you can have your old job back.”

“Old job?” I asked. I felt confused and saw the doctor shush the man with an odd glance of his eyes. Their eyebrows told the whole story. The owner of the theater had said the wrong thing, something the doctor had not expected. We left and went back to the hospital.

As we drove back, I asked, “What does he mean, old job back? How does he know my dreams? Have you been talking to him about me? Was this all a setup?”

“No, Starbuck.” He glanced at me and then back at the road. “I am afraid the cat is out of the bag. These people told me that you worked for them when you were a teenager.”

“But I worked with Fred and Allen at the foundry.”

“Don’t you think, Starbuck,” he said as he turned into the parking lot at the hospital, “that your dreams are suppressed memories returning?”

“But ... but ... I’m confused.”

“The people back there at the theater sure seem to know you.”

The car stopped. We got out, and the doctor escorted me back to my room and my bed.

After a few more days of talking, hypnosis, and dreaming, it became logical to me that I had worked at the theater instead of at the foundry with Allen.

It was explained to me that Fred and Allen were men that I had recalled from working on Anne and Elvin's farm, but I had been hallucinating at the hospital, seeing Allen and talking to him. I talked to other people who worked on my ward, and they didn't remember Allen.

It was strange that I hadn't known my own memory.

* * *

A day came that caused a setback in my therapy. I came to the realization that if there had been no Bo at the towers and no Fred and Allen at the foundry, then what about Gretchen and the Underhills? I panicked when I realized that the doctor was trying to tell me there was no Gretchen and that I had made her up. I screamed and yelled profanities at the doctor. I had to be taken out by a couple of tough guys dressed in white. I tried to fight them off, but they tied me to my bed and gave me a sedative.

* * *

I think I must have gone through several drugs before I calmed down enough for the doctor to continue my therapy. We focused on the war. That is when my troubles all started. I had joined the army and fought in many battles, but according to eye witnesses, I ran from the last battlefield and was never seen again until they found me coming from the Valenteen Theater. I do remember how scared I was. Just before we went through that canyon and again during the charge in the Plain of Goremon, I was shaking all over, and my teeth were chattering, and I was angry.

I couldn't believe that I had invented Gretchen and the Underhills. She was so real to me.

But they called that schizophrenia. I had to face up to my devils and to my saints or imagined saints.

After my therapy was over, I had completely new memories of what had happened, and it took several years. The one thing that held me back was my love for Gretchen. I still hope, to this day, that there is such a girl as Gretchen, but I had to let her go. The doctor suggested she was from a book I had read, for he had read several books to me with that kind of character. Maybe it was. I was a bookworm of sorts when I was little. I remember having read the Encyclopedia at Anne and Elvin's.

* * *

My true story went like this. After leaving Anne and Elvin's farm I found a job at the Valenteen Theater, met Bo, and started dating her. We did go to some cafes in Throughsome, the town to the north of Valenteen, but then we saw a parade of the King's men go by the theater one day, and I got all starry-eyed with my head filled with romantic stories of soldiers and war. I think I had seen too many movies. Anyway, I left Bo and joined the army. I found that it wasn't very romantic. I was shot at, sabered, bombed, and ran from shell shock. We had been on the north side of Valenteen, and knowing of all the nooks and crannies of the theater, I hid out until the end of the war. There, I went through my nightmares and had to invent memories of Gretchen in order to survive. I know she's an invention, but I like to think I have a guardian angel by that name.

Chapter Fifteen

Conclusion

“You’re ready to leave,” the doctor said. He stood there in his white smock, looking suave. “Pack your bags. But before you leave, I want you to go with this man.”

The group of patients I had been talking to about my therapy was parted by a giant of a guy in my estimation. Sir Gwynn stepped up to my bedside.

“Hello old friend,” he said, stretching out his hand.

We exchanged smiles, and the handshake was warm and strong. He pulled me to my feet, and I felt power flow through me like electricity. I jumped to attention and said “Yes!” We embraced. Here was a true friend. We held each other at arms length and laughed heartily.

“What would you like me to do, Captain?” I asked.

“Get dressed. We have an audience with His Majesty,” he said.

I looked at him quite astonished.

“Come on, come on. He won’t wait all day.”

“Am I ready?” I asked, slipping my pants on.

“Don’t worry,” he said with a serious but calming expression as his thick eyebrows came together. “When the Lord calls, we come.”

“That is our duty,” I said, completing his thought. “Yes, yes, I know.”

I stopped to say good-byes to the patients and thanked the doctor and nurses and walked out with Sir Gwynn while tying my tie.

“Do I have it right?” I asked. He only laughed a little.

The King's tent was the Holy of Holies in the camp of Israel. His throne was like the Ark of the Covenant I had read about in the Holy Book. I felt that I walked on holy ground as I approached with bowed head, prostrating myself before him. He bid me rise, and I rose. He bent down and lifted my chin to look me in the eye. It was like looking into eternity and being filled with infinite love. I felt like I was floating again and had to be helped out. I remember him saying that I had no more darkness left in me. Later, when I regained my strength and composure, I asked Sir Gwynn what he meant.

“Do you remember the battle in which you were lost?” he asked.

“Yes, a little,” I answered.

“That was your finest hour. You fought so valiantly, and your men, following your example, opened up a corridor for the rest of us to overcome the darkness. But you were lost in the darkness. Some say you deserted, but I think you were so brave that you just kept advancing and fighting. But when they found you, you were filled with darkness. That is why Nurse Bojensen had to be transferred. You would have harmed her.”

When he said those words, I realized what a mistake I had made and became very red in the face. He put his hand up to comfort me.

“That is all right now. Everything is ironed out and reconciled. Nurse Bojensen is safe, and you are safe. You have found the light again.”

* * *

There was no more war, so most of the army was dismantled and disarmed. Sir Gwynn gave me a big bear hug and a slap on the back and we said our good-byes. I knew my days underground, that is, my fantasies, were gone forever. I desired only the open air and the wide

prairies and low hills of Anne and Elvin's. I received a letter from Allen. He said that he also had joined the army, but was now back on the farm. He had written at the request of a doctor. Anyway, he invited me to come back to the farm, so I took him up on it and headed for the nearest train station.

* * *

As I walked out of camp, a thought occurred to me. I wanted to go to Throughsome one more time. I just wanted to check something. I thumbed a ride down through the Plain of Goremon, which now was green with grass and a few clumps of trees surrounding brooks and fountains.

When we arrived at Throughsome, I was let off at the edge of town. I carried my duffel bag past a foundry and a few other shops, but there was no huge factory as I had imagined. Passing along a road on the west side of town, I saw a sign pointing the way to a lake. *I must be in the right neighborhood.* To the east I saw a little village where I thought the towers might have been, and as I stood staring, I got the courage to turn to my left to a rolling hill.

My heart pounded at the expectation of discovering whether my dreams were true or not. My palms sweated as I crossed the road. There was an old oak tree at the bottom of the hill, but the hilltop was bare as I had dreamed. I scanned the side of the hill. There was no porthole through which I could see my old apartment. I hiked to the top and walked along the ridge, digging with my foot at every bald spot I came to. There was no door down into a labyrinth of tunnels and apartments where people would have lived. I sighed. Alas, what the doctor had made me believe was true. There had been no Gretchen or Underhills. I wiped away a tear. They had been so real, but I was still an orphan. I must have a guardian angel named Gretchen

though, because she still appears in my dreams and talks to me.

* * *

I caught the train there in Throughsome, boarded, and settled down to a lot of meditation. I had no desire to do great things or to be a hero. I simply wanted to tend sheep ... simply to serve. My future was to be a shepherd, living out in the open, out in the fresh air and sunlight and sleep under the vast carpet of stars.

I hadn't known a father or a mother. Anne and Elvin had always treated me as a farm hand growing up on their place, yet, I had no wish for it to be otherwise. The light that my angel Gretchen had brought me was enough. I was filled with light and love.

Anne and Elvin were now old, and I thought they wouldn't mind having another hand to help on the farm. But when I got there, I found Allen in charge and Anne and Elvin had retired. They had a large porch built onto their place, but they were usually gone on vacation. Their daughter was married and gone, as all of their children were.

Allen told me that he was to be living in the big house with his new wife who was there to take care of Anne and Elvin on their return. I told him he was an old son of a gun, and that congratulations were in order. I asked who the lucky girl was, but he wanted to surprise me. He told me now that I was here, he wanted me to round up the sheep on the north slopes and herd them south into the valley. I knew the routine by heart. He gave me a wagon and a dog and we headed out. He said he would be visiting me with the missus in a few days.

* * *

It didn't take me long to round up the sheep with my new dog Trick. He was a natural. He knew everything about sheep herding, and obeyed my every command. Allen said that he

was taught by the best. So, we headed the sheep down into the valley where there was a small grove of very old oak trees, bent and gnarled, with a winding brook running nearby. There was a bridge for the sheep and the wagon to cross over, which they didn't seem to mind doing, as they also were all well trained.

I had been camping there for several days and was taking a snooze under one of the old trees when I opened my eyes and saw a woman with an easel and a canvas painting a picture. She was situated as though painting me. Her face was behind the canvas. I could only see the top of her forehead. I thought I must have been sleeping a long time not to have noticed someone there. I thought I would get up and introduce myself to Allen's new wife. I knew that was who it was, because I could hear Allen talking to her. He must have been on the other side of a nearby tree.

I studied the woman for a moment. She had dark hair and light brown skin. In answering Allen, she stood straight and showed her eyes. I gasped. It was Bo.

I was quite startled. Dark dreams returned. Had Allen known Bo? I remembered that she had intimated at the hospital that she had feelings for Allen, but I hadn't paid any attention to that. All I knew was that I thought she was in love with Allen, but hadn't that been all part of my illusions? He hadn't been at the hospital, yet here he was, and they were married. I loved both of them, so I just smiled and offered my congratulations.

"Well. Bo." I gave a short little laugh because I was embarrassed at both Allen and me loving her. Now she was back in my life when I thought the whole thing was settled. I offered my hand and said, "I want to congratulate you and Allen. I think you will make a nice couple."

Bo stood at her easel looking as startled as I was. Then I heard another female voice. She

must have been behind the tree with Allen.

“I don’t think so,” she said, standing up and coming around the tree for me to see. “I think they would make a lousy couple.” They all three laughed.

Allen walked over and put his arm around the artist, shaking her a little. “Bucky, you don’t marry your sister! Besides, I’ve already got a wife.”

Then I noticed for the first time in my life that perhaps Allen’s tan was not a tan but permanent skin color. I had taken for granted that his skin color had been caused by working outside most of his life. I guess it was genetic.

Allen put his other arm around his wife as she approached him. He said, “Bucky, I would like you to meet Teresa. She was one of the nurses at the hospital. Bo introduced us.”

I know my face was as red as a beet; I could feel the heat emanating from it.

“But, I thought,” I said, scratching my head, “that you were never at the hospital.”

“No, but I was around for a short while with the rest of the army in the camp. Bo and Teresa would visit the men at the canteen and give them shots.”

“You and Bo, brother and sister?” I stammered. “You never told me.”

“You never asked,” Allen answered. “Besides, you were too young when you left for the big city.”

“Let me get back to my painting! All of you!” commanded Bo. “You’ve spoiled the whole thing. Now, Buck, if you will go back to napping, and you two stand by the tree ...”

I had to see what she was painting. She reluctantly showed me. It was me leaning up against the oak tree taking a nap with Allen and Teresa standing next to the tree to my left as if talking.

Bo and I were attracted like two magnets and stayed together the rest of the afternoon. She finished painting Allen and Teresa, but she had to use her imagination to finish painting me snoozing under the tree, as I had to watch her paint.

I didn't know what change had come over Bo, but I soon found out that she was in love with me and had been ever since she first saw me, but there had to be a change in me before our love for each other could ripen into something that would last. I guess I had to grow up first. In fact, that's what she told me.

"I didn't know how to tell you that I loved you," she said with her sweet face next to mine. "And you had to grow up." She poked me in the ribs.

"We were just friends when we knew each other at the theater," I said, putting my face closer. She dabbed my nose with paint.

"After I'm finished," she said, which I hoped meant she would then kiss me.

She did kiss me, and I thought I went to Heaven. I became senseless, just staring into space. She had to shake me.

We had a picnic with Allen and Teresa after the long wait and chatted until it was time for the three of them to leave. They wanted to get back to the big house before the sun finished going down.

I had a hard time going to sleep that night. I remained in a daze for hours.

* * *

After the sheep were fattened up and harvest was over, Bo and I got married. If we had gotten married when we were younger it wouldn't have lasted. We were both too selfish. As it turned out, we now had something to give to each other ... doing things to serve one another.

We built a little cottage by that grove of oak trees. I spent the rest of my days with Bo and the sheep, selling wool for Anne and Elvin, sometimes thinning the flock by trucking a few to the market, playing with our children, and later, grandchildren. Bo became a well known artist. We had twelve children, each one having their own story to tell. I wrote this story because the kids teased me into it.

THE END