

SANCTUARY

The boundary stakes became redundant once more as spring leaned into summer. The maturing crops had grown to define the edge with rich green clarity; beyond them lay only curled brown leaves, papery dry, skidding in the breeze. After the first germination, marking the edge had become his evening ritual. Using the seedlings as his guide, he would drive a stake into the ground at a safe distance from the edge and then never pass further. In time, fifty-five posts ringed the farm. Every winter, they showed their worth.

The day carried an irritable heat. Clouds were scarce and with little volume. In a corner of a field, he dug a small hollow with a trowel, then pulled a flattened seed from a bag and carefully deposited it into the hole. He covered it with a mound of earth. A regimented grid of several hundred similar mounds covered the field. Sweat had gathered on his back.

Before, there had been nothing but the two of them, no life to draw the line. She had fallen sick when they first reached the farm, bedridden with fever. By the time she was well enough to walk again, crops had begun surfacing in the fields close to the house. Using a scuffed manual extracted from the farmhouse's haphazard library, he had identified the misshapen seedlings: the sturdy stalks of potatoes, the crinkled leaves of broad beans, the

SANCTUARY

skyward stems of oats. For three years he had tilled, sown, cultivated, harvested. Just enough to sustain them.

His morning work was complete. He returned to the farmhouse, following the worn trail through the field of birch stumps. The firewood the trees had provided had allowed the two of them to weather three winters. New ragged-leaved saplings emerged from the rootstock.

When he entered the bedroom, she was by the window. The room smelt of tomato plants; they occupied the windowsill, heavily laden, clinging to bamboo canes for support. The smallest tomatoes were a deep green, while the largest displayed a hesitant blush of orange. She was pollinating the last batch of delicate yellow flowers with a paintbrush.

“I planted the courgettes,” he said as he entered the bedroom. She turned at the sound of his voice.

“Thank you,” she said.

They embraced.

“How are they?” he asked, flicking at a leaf.

“They’re getting there.”

“Good.” He kissed her neck as she gazed out the window. The sun hovered over an old twisted oak, dead and desiccated, on the crest of the hill behind the farm. It was the only tree still standing within sight of the house. When she had asked him to spare it from the wood burner, he had agreed.

“Do you remember that tomato sauce I made? When we invited round that couple from up north?” she said.

“I don’t think so.”

SANCTUARY

“They’d just bought a house down the road from ours. One big enough to start a family, they said.”

“Why are they in your mind? We barely knew them.”

“I don’t know. Just remembering things.”

They didn’t speak for some moments.

“What will we do next winter?” she asked.

“Come on, let’s not think about that just yet. Things are good right now.” The hungry gap had ended and the fields promised plenty of food for months.

“We’ve used up almost all our firewood.”

“I can go further at night. Find more trees.”

“There’s nothing much left within a safe distance, you told me.”

“The nights are longer in winter. There’ll be time.”

“Then what about the winter after that?”

He shrugged. He plucked a tomato from the vine and bit into it.

“Sour,” he said, making a face.

“Of course it is. They’re not ripe yet. Don’t waste them.”

#

The night was full of stars but empty of sound. Before, for the first few weeks, only the days had been mute; come nightfall, unseen scavengers had scuttled in the dark and fed off the dead. Over time, the noises dwindled, terminated by either slow starvation or a sharp encounter with the sunrise.

The first day, when they had stepped outside to find the streets silent, they had wandered for a while. At first they had tried to make sense of what had happened, why they had been spared, but soon they were just trying to stay alive. They would raid the cupboards

SANCTUARY

and sleep in the beds of houses chosen at random, avoiding rooms with east-facing windows.

The drying remains on doorsteps were less easy to ignore.

When it became apparent that the city held no answers nor consolation, they headed into the countryside. They had found the farmhouse in a valley, sheltered from the worst of the dust storms. They hadn't intended to stay long, but then they had discovered the circle – and, with time, its source.

He fell asleep within minutes; the physical work of the days meant he always slept soundly. He awoke abruptly once in the night, startled by some swiftly-forgotten nightmare. Next to him, the light of the moon reflected from her open eyes.

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When daylight roused him, she was standing by the window.

“There’s a molehill,” she said.

He pushed back the bedsheets and joined her. Down on the lawn, a miniature mountain of earth protruded impudently from the thin grass.

“Still alive, after all this time,” he said. “A little miracle.”

“I want to see it.”

“You can see it from here.”

“I want to go closer. Please.”

“I’m sorry. No further than the back doorstep. That’s what we agreed on.”

She fidgeted with the curtain.

“Let’s make some breakfast,” he said.

They cooked a coarse porridge, made from last year’s oats. They each sprinkled half a teaspoon of sugar on the top – an indulgence.

SANCTUARY

“I’m going to look at the irrigation system this morning,” he said. “See if I can find that leak before the dust storm gets here.”

“I’ll make some sauerkraut. See you at lunchtime.”

He pulled on his boots and left the house. The soil that clung to their soles was dark and sticky.

He had made the irrigation system following the instructions in a book. They had found the farmhouse replete with books: practical, serious books on farming, on cooking, on self-sufficiency. The books had taught them how to survive with what they had.

He investigated the network of pipes methodically, starting from near the farmhouse and moving outwards in a growing spiral, experimenting with the taps, watchful for any flaws. When he reached the potato field on the periphery of the farm, a rush of water could be heard above the wind. A pipe had cracked, grown brittle with age, spilling water onto a muddy patch of earth.

Yet he did not approach it. The pipe was surrounded by collapsing potato plants, shrivelling and browning under the undiluted sun. A boundary post stood upright beyond them. The centre of the circle had shifted.

He dropped his toolbox at his feet and pivoted towards the farmhouse, stumbling into a run. He skirted the house and slowed as he reached the lawn. She was outside, crouched by the molehill.

“How could you?” he said. She jumped; she had not seen him coming.

“I just wanted a look.”

“There is a corner of the potato field that is dead now,” he said. “A week’s worth of food, gone.”

“I’m sorry.”

SANCTUARY

“This is your one responsibility.” He stood with his feet apart and his arms hanging at his sides. “Can’t you see how important it is?”

She looked down.

“It’s easier for you,” she said.

“What?”

“It is. You can go anywhere within the circle.”

“You mean I have to do all the hard work? I end every day exhausted.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“It’s the only way. You know that. It’s your job to keep the farm alive, and it’s my job to keep us alive.”

“I just wanted to look, alright? It’s been so long since I’ve been outside.”

“We decided on that together. Don’t you remember?”

“Of course I remember.”

“Well, then.”

They stood facing each other.

“You should go inside,” he said.

She looked at him for a minute more, before turning and walking slowly to the door.

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Lunch was quiet. She finished before him; she didn’t need to eat as much.

“I should be able to replant that corner,” he said. “Something that grows fast. Lettuce, probably.”

“That’s good.”

They left it at that.

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SANCTUARY

He came in from the fields just before dusk. The kitchen smelt of cabbage leaves and boiled potatoes. She moved to greet him.

“Don’t touch me. I’m all dirty.”

The water in the shower was cold, but cut through the veneer of dust and sweat that covered him. He had been working hard.

For dinner she had made new potatoes and spring greens with a little chilli seasoning, cooked on a closely-rationed fire. A candle flickered on the table between them; the dust storm muffled the evening sunlight. When she finished, she set down her cutlery and rested her elbows on the table. He continued eating, intent on his meal.

“What are we doing this for?” she asked.

He frowned as he chewed.

“What do you mean?” he said.

“What’s the end goal? Why are we bothering?”

“Well, things might get better. Things are getting better. Like the molehill – who would’ve thought there was a mole still alive?”

She sighed.

“It doesn’t mean anything. That mole has been lucky. But it doesn’t know about the circle. As soon as it puts its head above ground outside the boundary, it’s gone. It might be the last mole in the world, and nothing will protect it for long.”

“What’s your point?”

“It’s the same with everything. Even if we continue to cling on, make it through another year, even another after that – then what?”

He swallowed his last mouthful.

“There’s one thing we could do, if it’s purpose you’re looking for,” he said.

SANCTUARY

She gazed at him without expression.

“No. It’s not fair. This isn’t the right sort of world for that,” she said.

“If we time it right, around the harvest perhaps.”

“Even if somehow we could find enough food and warmth to raise it, what then? We grow old, we die, leaving it by itself? Or if I die, does it die too?”

“You’re thinking decades ahead.”

“It makes no difference, however far you look.”

He stood suddenly and she shrank back as he leaned over the table, but he was only gathering the plates.

While he washed up, she sat on the sofa in the living room, reading a paperback she had read many times before. The armchairs all faced the television. They had never rearranged, despite the perpetually dark screen.

She shivered when she felt him touch her shoulder from behind. His hands were still cold from the washing water.

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In the night, they began to make love. As their movements became more frenetic he drew her close against him. She tried to push him away but he had grown strong from manual labour.

“It’d be born at the end of winter,” she said. “It wouldn’t stand a chance.”

He stopped and rolled away, panting, his back to her. She pressed the bedsheets to her face and tried not to make a sound.

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She wasn’t in the bedroom when he woke the next morning. He found her standing in the kitchen, fully dressed. She was wearing her old trainers. She hadn’t worn shoes in years.

SANCTUARY

He put a hand up to her face, then drew it back when she flinched. Something trembled on his lips, but then he shook his head and moved to the stove to heat water for porridge.

“If we leave, everything we’ve built and protected here will be gone,” he said, steadily stirring in the oats. “The crops, the mole. Your tomatoes.”

“And what are they living for?”

“Does there need to be a reason? Was there ever a reason, even before?”

“It felt like there was.”

“Here’s your breakfast. Can you take those shoes off, please?”

She did as he said and took the bowl he handed her.

When they had finished, he pulled on his own boots.

“You won’t do anything stupid when I’m out?” he said.

She didn’t answer.

He sighed and opened a cupboard underneath the sink, pushing aside jars of pickles and preserves. He brought out a nylon rope.

She took a step back.

“No,” she said.

“Just until you’re feeling more like yourself.”

“I’ll run.”

“I can run faster.”

She looked for her shoes, but they were gone. He had taken them when she hadn’t been looking.

“Just until you’re feeling better,” he said. He moved towards her.

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SANCTUARY

It was near midday when the fields ahead of him began to change. Rows of potatoes and beans and oats, wilting, dying. Entire fields crumpling. He turned and ran.

He saw her reach the summit of the hill and pull herself into the boughs of the old oak. Dry leaves and powdery acorns crunched under his boots as he approached. She had rope burns around her wrists and a tomato plant clutched to her chest. Her feet were bare.

He stood beneath her, catching his breath.

“It’s dangerous up there,” he said at last.

“It doesn’t matter.”

“Half the farm. Gone. Why?”

She smiled. She picked an orange-green tomato from the plant in her arms and bit into it, spurting juice. She grimaced at the taste and let the plant fall. Its aroma burst around him as it hit the leaf litter.

She stood up on the branch.

“I can see for miles from here,” she said. “All the way down the valley.”

“Come down.”

“I can see villages and a lake.”

He had to crane his neck to look at her. The sun was directly above, making him squint against its harsh light.

“We can go visit them, if you like,” he said.

“That would be nice.”

She shifted her weight on the dead branch. It cracked.

As she fell, he stretched out his arms to catch her.

THE END