

Happy Endings

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CANDACE

“Red or purple?” George asked her. This is how he greeted her when Candace answered her phone.

“Red or purple what?” she replied.

“That’s a surprise,” he said, pretending to be exasperated. He was doing a lousy job of hiding his excitement. “Red or purple?”

Every Friday George called her with options to some secret thing. She would find out what it was tonight when she got home.

Candace was not a pretty girl. She was not a talented girl. No one ever put up pretenses otherwise.

As a child, just as all the other girls, she too dreamed of being an actress or a model or a dancer. She imagined walking down a runway in towering heels and fabulous clothes. She imagined taking her final bow on a stage quickly filling with bouquets to a standing ovation.

But unlike other girls, no one ever entertained the possibility of these notions. They told her that things like that don’t happen to ordinary people. No one ever said she wasn’t good enough. No one ever said she wasn’t pretty enough. But it was implied.

On Valentine’s Day she didn’t go to school. It wasn’t that the other kids didn’t give her valentine cards, but they were never the ones you hoped for. She got a bag filled with the generic, “have to give you one, but don’t want you to think it means anything” cards. Every cartoon character on TV wished her a happy Valentine’s day, but none offered love or friendship.

She did not expect invitations to parties or dances, especially not from boys. She didn't fret over it. She had gone to a dance once, by herself. She lost interest in the whole thing rather quickly as she watched girls whisper, too afraid to talk to boys, and boys milling about pretending not to be interested in girls. She left after a full twenty minutes of being remarkably underwhelmed.

Life seemed like a series of dances for Candace, even though she didn't bother attending another one. All around her people whispered about what they wanted, pretended they didn't want anything, and accomplished nothing in particular. She continued to be unimpressed.

Finding it irritating having to witness the awkward and pathetic interactions of people within rooms, she preferred to study the rooms themselves. She began to see their intricacies; borders, piping, tiling, grout. She worked in the office of a trucking company where she mostly read books about fashion and interior design.

She had been studying beams in the ceiling of a restaurant, counting down the time until it wouldn't be considered impolite to leave her office's holiday party, when George had asked her what she was searching for. After she told him she was only looking at the beams, they had discussed architecture and the best places in town to observe it for the rest of the evening.

"I don't even particularly like those colors," she said to him now.

"I know," she knew he was grinning and probably dancing his fingers around on a table as he was wont to do when he was trying to hold back a secret.

Her fiance delighted in their weekly game. Last time it had been restaurants. He had asked "big or small." She'd chosen small and he took her to a tiny Italian place with

romantic lighting. The "big" option would have been a large, two floor Mexican restaurant with endless margaritas. One week she had inadvertently chosen where he'd proposed to her. She sighed, smiling.

"I suppose I'll find out when I get home?" she asked.

"Perhaps," he said.

As with most Friday afternoons, she spent the rest of hers wondering over the outcome of her decision. She was sure purple would end up being the better choice.

APPARENTLY

“Animal Shelter Ahead.”

She read the sign as she drove past. She read it every time she drove past. It used to be she would wonder why you would need warning about an animal shelter. Back then there was nothing significant about an animal shelter.

Now when she read the sign it meant she had to be cautious. It meant she shouldn't stop until she was several miles away. It meant it might be wise to drive a little faster.

There were so many places that were dangerous now. Sometimes she felt like there was a dream reality. There was a reality in the past when all you had to worry about was the harm that could be done by other people. Don't go into bad neighborhoods or dark allies; stay where it's bright and heavily populated. Then there was the reality where you don't go into places that were heavily populated. You stay away from animal shelters, vets, ranches. You still stay where it's brightly lit, but only so that you have a chance to see something attacking you and escape. Which reality felt like the dream reality would change depending on the day.

Today, a world where someone would want to go to an animal shelter sounded silly and fantastical. But whenever she was outside she felt that way. It was safer. Those who still clung to their old ways, their old world, had already died with it years ago.

Only the holidays had survived the turn. Not all of them. Traveling for three separate occasions during the winter was far too dangerous. They now counted down and toasted to the coming year on Thanksgiving Eve and

exchanged gifts and sang carols on Thanksgiving as well. Most people didn't make a trip to see relatives. Either they already lived with them, or all of them were dead.

But not Wendy. All but her uncle Danny had managed to survive. Mercifully, he had died from falling down the stairs as they had fled from an attack. Or so Wendy allowed her family to continue believing. She didn't have the heart to tell them she had seen him wandering around, sans an arm, two days later. A convoy had come to rescue them later that day, so she knew they would never find out.

That was back in the days when they still had convoys. Back when there were still plenty of survivors. Everyone was either already saved, dead, or trapped in some bunker.

There was a theory that every underground bunker was full of corpses. There were surely those who starved from lack of supplies, but more probably lacked the will to live. Years with nothing but four walls, artificial light, canned food, and if you were lucky, the same two or three people for company was bound to drive anyone crazy. No one was ever going to be searching bunkers because everyone was assumed to be already dead.

Wendy felt bad for the ones trapped in bunkers. She'd rather get turned than slowly lose her mind in the confines of a self-made prison.

She was running low on gas, but she didn't want to stop. Being stranded on an empty tank was a far more horrifying option, so she pulled into the nearest gas station. All gas stations were regularly refilled and kept open. Nowadays people were too busy with survival to worry about money, so all you had to do was pull up and pump.

She wished she hadn't gone alone now; that she had taken Paul up on his offer to drop her off at her family's house. He was a mouth breather, but he was also another

pair of eyes that could watch her back as she pumped gas. Now she had to keep looking over her shoulders and listening for the slightest sound.

It seemed to take forever, but finally her tank was full. She planned to fill up again at the next safe station whether she needed it yet or not. She couldn't risk being stuck in the middle of nowhere. She scolded herself for being so impatient back in Clifton. She had left the lines at the pump because she couldn't stand to watch the bickering couple in front of her any longer.

She was driving for two hours when she realized she should have been in civilization again. She should have been surrounded by buildings and going through safe zone tests, but she was still surrounded by fields on either side of the road. Pulling over in an open area could mean life or death, especially alone, but she had no choice. Not finding her way and ending up on an empty tank in a dead zone would have been much worse.

She had already been headed in the wrong direction when she'd reached the gas station and had to risk another fill-up as she back-tracked.

She had just put her car back into drive when she heard a scream.

A scream only meant one thing. Someone was about to die.

Any sound in these parts, the uninhabited, meant that the turned were near. Any vocalization of any kind meant that something was still living. It also meant that they wouldn't be living for very long.

Usually you only heard the screams of someone stupid enough to be travelling by foot who was being turned. Years ago you could still hear the howls of animals, and when you did you headed in the other direction. All those animals

were dead or turned now. You would be lucky to hear their footsteps as they came at you.

Wendy winced and closed her eyes. She wanted to go and help, but even if she hadn't been alone, that would have been a suicide mission. She started to count to ten before opening her eyes. She would feel better about leaving when she knew she wasn't leaving someone to die. By the time she got to ten they would be dead and she could leave.

She heard another scream on 6, but this one was closer. She opened her eyes and looked in the direction of the screaming. She didn't see anything for another minute, then she saw a woman about her age running and screaming. Not very far after, there were two wolves chasing her. No growls or barks, just silence and the woman's screams.

Wendy rolled down her window and yelled, "Get in!" She rolled the window back up immediately and unlocked the doors. As soon as the woman closed the door, she pulled away. The wolves gave chase, but they were soon out of sight. They were probably still running after them, following the sound of the engine, but it felt better not being able to still see them.

They drove for another minute before Wendy gave the woman the standard test. A lot of people had died by picking up a passenger about to turn. She wasn't about to become a statistic. Or at least she wanted to remain one of the living ones.

The woman recited the alphabet, backward and forward, for a full two minutes. It took at least five minutes to turn completely, but only two before you couldn't perform simple tasks that required concentration. The speed of the recitation didn't matter. But stuttering, missing letters, those were the danger signs.

After she passed the check she said, "I'm Amy."

“Hey, I’m Wendy,” she glanced at the woman sitting next to her. Amy had finally gained some composure.

“What the hell were you doing out there?”

“Asshole boyfriend,” said Amy. Wendy waited for more explanation but there was silence.

“What... about an asshole boyfriend?” she asked, not quite sure how to pose the question. She didn’t want to seem nosy, but she really wanted to know how someone could end up running through an uninhabited zone alone.

“My asshole- ex- boyfriend left me to die,” said Amy. “We were fighting, as usual, and he said ‘You think you’re always right. Well, see how long you and your righteousness survive alone.’ And he dragged me out of the car and drove away.”

Wendy didn’t even know what to say to that. She had seen people who hated each other in the midst of fighting stop to help each other get away from the turned, then go back to fighting. Despite any problems you might have with someone, leaving them to be turned was monstrous.

“Well, he’s probably lost somewhere and turned by now, and I’m still alive,” said Amy after a few moments when Wendy didn’t respond. “And good riddance, honestly. I mean, he dragged me out of his car!”

Wendy hesitated a moment before she said, “That is definitely unforgivable.”

Even as despicable as this guy was, she still found it hard wishing a turning on him.

“Headed home for the holiday?” asked Wendy after they’d been driving a few miles. Conversation always flowed easier when you knew there weren’t two turned wolves in the immediate vicinity.

She saw Amy shake her head out of the corner of her eye, “No, all my family’s dead,” she said. “We were headed

to Joe’s mother’s house. I liked his mother. She was a really sweet lady. Don’t know how she managed to raise a bastard like him.”

Wendy started to wonder if she and Amy got in an argument, would Amy think twice before dragging her out of the car.

“Oh,” said Wendy. She hoped Amy wouldn’t want to stay with her, that there would be somewhere else to drop her off. It was customary to take “strays” home with you. It was inhuman not to, really. And Wendy would if she had to, but she hoped she didn’t.

Amy sighed, “I have to pee.”

“What?” Wendy asked. No one had to pee on a road trip. No one drank anything before starting a road trip since a pit stop could be lethal.

“I have to pee,” Amy repeated.

“You didn’t go before you left?” Wendy asked in disbelief.

“Of course I did,” Amy said, with the nerve to sound annoyed. “But I guess running for my life and all that adrenaline got my bladder going, too.”

“We can’t stop,” said Wendy, “This place is full of the turned.”

Wendy was throwing repeated glances at Amy, still in disbelief of what she was hearing. While she still wasn’t on Joe’s side, she thought she might understand how he could come to throwing Amy out of a car.

Amy rolled her eyes, “There’s a town in another five miles. I’ll just go there.”

“Are you kidding? This is a completely uninhabited zone. Stopping in a town is suicide,” said Wendy.

“We’ll find a house that’s all locked up and I’ll just go there,” said Amy, sounding as though she had done this a million times before and that Wendy was overreacting. Wendy knew she wasn’t overreacting. In populated areas there were constant warnings on the radio warning of the dangers of making stops anywhere, let alone a dead zone.

“I’m not dying because you have bladder control issues!” said Wendy.

“Listen,” said Amy, “either we stop and I pee, or we keep going and you get to smell piss in your car forever.”

“Fine,” Wendy said through her teeth, “we’ll stop.” One of the things that stopped after people started turning was car manufacturing. This car was literally irreplaceable. Only the military still made vehicles and no one would be willing to trade her for their car.

They pulled off the road at the town a few miles later. They drove for a few minutes before finally coming upon a house that didn’t look like a broken ruin.

“I’ll go here,” said Amy, “Come on.”

“What?” asked Wendy.

“Come on,” said Amy with her hand on the door handle.

“I’m staying in the car,” said Wendy.

“No, I need someone to watch my back in there,” Amy said.

“I’ll watch your back from here,” said Wendy.

“Come on,” said Amy, “This place is deserted. We’ll be fine. It’s just a precaution.”

Wendy wanted to argue that if precautions were necessary, then there was a good chance they wouldn’t be fine, but she wanted to get this over with and get back on the road. And besides, she was right. The place was deserted. They hadn’t even seen the usual ambler that was typical in

towns such as these. Everything would be fine.

She opened her door and headed toward the house. She heard Amy follow her. Then she heard running footsteps. She turned to see a group of five turned running toward them. There had been amblers, they just hadn’t chanced to see them.

They had already walked far enough from the car that they wouldn’t be able to make it back so they ran toward the house.

The door was unlocked and they ran inside. They were about to run down the hall, hopefully toward stairs, when they heard footsteps running down. They ran toward the back, toward the kitchen where, through the open door and broken windows, they could see turned ones running through the yard to join the quiet commotion. There was an open door to the basement and they ran for it.

They ran down the stairs to find what awaited them in the dark. They could be running to their deaths, but they had no other option. They ran into the dark. There was another door at the bottom of the stairs and Amy slammed it behind them.

They heard bangs and scraping from the angry and starving turned ones outside. Inside, they could only hear the sound of their own breathing but nothing else.

When they finally caught their breath and the noises outside the door started to subside, Wendy groped the wall for a light switch. While only the power for populated areas were still maintained, power was provided to all areas.

Sure enough, when Wendy flipped the light switch, florescent lights flickered on.

They were in a room full of shelving fully stocked with supplies. There was a shelf for everything; canned and packaged foods, bottled water, a water purifier, even

a power generator. There were bunk beds up against one wall, so that occupants could shelve themselves at night. A door next to the bunk beds was presumably a bathroom.

“Someone could live in here for years,” said Wendy, looking at the food on the shelves.

“I guess we’re gonna survive after all,” Amy said.

“Apparently,” said Wendy.

BROKENUP

The worst part is it wasn’t bad.

If it had been bad, it wouldn’t hurt. I could drown out the pain with anger and vindication and logic. I could remember the bad and bury the good and move on unscathed.

I wouldn’t obsessively play “our” song because sometimes it makes me feel good, but most times it just reminds me that it’s over and irreparable and makes me cry, but I keep playing it hoping that this will be one of the feel-good plays. I wouldn’t need the ice packs you left in the freezer to minimize the puffiness around my eyes before work in the morning. I wouldn’t have the constant clock ticking in my head, an endless metronome that counts down to when I can stop pretending that I’m ok and moving on and not endlessly thinking of you.

During the day I tell myself it’s not over. I tell myself I’ll call you on my lunch break. And on my lunch break I tell myself I’ll call you after work. And all the while the clock keeps ticking.

And I deleted your number from my phone because if I kept calling and hanging up, you would stop answering blocked calls, and getting your voicemail instead of your voice when I know you’re there would be unbearable. I spent days trying to decide whether the fact that technology allows you to never need to memorize anyone’s phone number is a blessing or a curse. If not for that, your number would be permanently etched into my brain, programmed into the muscle memory of my fingertips. Instead, my

fingers remember how to call you with speed dial, but there's no longer your number in that memory slot. And I finally decided that it's both. It is both a blessing and a curse because, although all I want to do is call just to hear you say "hello," it is best that I do not. It is best that I let your voice slowly fade from my memory. Even though that is the least desirable thing I can think of doing right now.

The weekends are the worst. The nine hours I spend on weekdays pretending I'll call you later are open and empty, waiting for me to fill them in. I fill them with denial, and "our song" and washing. I have washed everything I own at least ten times. I swear I have the cleanest apartment anyone has ever seen. I should probably phone the Guinness Book of Records, because I have no doubt I would make the cut. The only reason I don't is that the media shows up when people make it into the Guinness Book, and they would ask me what inspired me to clean so much, and I'd be forced to admit to the whole world that I'm unforgivably pathetic and that the only way I can keep from killing myself is by cleaning.

I said the worst thing was that it wasn't bad. I change my mind. While that is definitely horrendously bad, on second glance, it really is only second best to the very worst thing. The very worst thing absolutely has to be that this is all my fault. If it weren't, and if I could blame you, I might be able to slant this into something tolerable.

And don't misunderstand me. I blame you. If only you had done a better job of communicating your feelings. If only you had been around more often when I was available. Did you ever think about taking my schedule into consideration? But this part, the blaming you, it all happens at the crescendo of the denial. When lost in a mass of denial I can tell myself that it wasn't my fault at all and that this was inevitable and that it should have happened

sooner. But even then, even when I'm in the throes of lying to myself, I know that I'm lying. Somewhere in the undercurrent I always know what really happened. I always know that this is something I did and you didn't want.

And I was wrong. That isn't the worst part. The worst part is that you left thinking that I didn't care. Or that I didn't care enough. But I did. I cared so much! And that's why I had to erase your number. That's why I couldn't stop calling you. Because I knew if I could just explain to you that I did care, that there were entire days that I didn't think of anything but you, then things would be ok. They probably would never go back to how they were. I might never see you again. But at least you would know that I'm not the careless jerk I acted like. And that you were loved. Sometimes overwhelmingly so. Every single day. And that I'm sorry for making you ever feel otherwise. And there's a small part of me, a ridiculous and hopeless part I know, but a part all the same that thinks if only I could somehow successfully convey this all to you, that maybe this would fix everything. That this would be enough to reverse the damage and make everything better. But I know that, even if I somehow were able to find the words to tell you how I feel and properly apologize, that it would never go back to how it was. The wound is bigger than the band-aid can cover. So I deleted your number rather than putting myself through a new cycle of pain and you through the most awkward conversation in the universe.

My sister says that I'll get over this. That one day I'll wake up and you won't be the first thing on my mind. I've had heartbreak before, and I know it felt like a perpetual annihilation and that I healed. And I know that my sister thinks that what she says is true. That I will move on and find someone who fits me even better, but I swear she's wrong. There will never ever be another person in a million years that I will love even half as much.

THE WAR

Linstan made his way through the foliage, careful neither to harm himself nor the protective wall of shrubbery hiding the tracks. He had left his bag in the tunnel behind him. The bag would mark him as a messenger; would mark him for dead. Although the messages he held were probably benign letters to reassure loved ones of the sender's safety, a soldier wouldn't hesitate to kill or detain him; wouldn't want to risk leaking a communication from rebels or spies.

Once upon a time, this railway was the most important route in all of the five kingdoms. It was the heart and the lifeblood of Delvia, running an endless circuit that took a week to complete.

Once a week, when the train made it to their station, every person from every town across the five kingdoms would gather to collect their letters from loved ones. Because of this one week circuit, Delvia became known as "The Realm of 7 Days."

The Realm of 7 Days was a prosperous realm. Goods, food, messages, and thereby money, flowed freely between the kingdoms. The wealth of supplies and the ease of availability gave very little reason for unrest. The train was the sole reason for the realm's success and, for this reason, it was very strange that such an integral part of the society was known simply as "the train."

The train brought prosperity, but most importantly, it brought news. It was very common for families to be spread throughout the five kingdoms. In a family business,

one sibling could enjoy the balmy atmosphere of Caldos while working the farm, another could run a merchant stall in the sparkling winter beauty of Thalden, and still another could keep track of finances in the Persheen mountains. These simulpra families had become such a common part of society that to have an entire family in one location was rare. Messages between the kingdoms were so numerous and so crucial that they took up three separate cars on the train. To be one of the sorters who worked in shifts around the clock on these cars was a highly esteemed appointment. Failing delivery of one of these messages could have dire consequences and one error meant the immediate termination from the position. To say nothing of the shame and exile that would follow. And so it was fitting that the last message the train had ever delivered had been news of The War.

The people of Delvia had enjoyed such a long-standing peace that here wasn't even a written recollection, let alone a living one, of having been in a war. They were sure there must have been wars in the past. They had guards in place to keep out the wars raging in neighboring realms, and someone must have conquered their lands initially, but no one knew how or when it had happened. And since this was the only war they knew of, they called it "The War."

Now Linstan used the deserted track to deliver messages between kingdoms. Its desertion had allowed it to become a safe haven. The herbage that surrounded it had become wildly overgrown, building a barrier that protected the tracks from the outside world. The train, which powered itself with inert energy, had been left to run wild forever. The ever-running train cleared the overgrowth from the tracks, thereby creating a train-shaped tunnel that was easy to travel, albeit dangerous to those with an unwary ear. The tunnel was the last place in the realm that was

beautiful and peaceful and Linstan relished every moment he spent inside.

He hated coming to Megaris. They lived under the guise of freedom, of peace and honor. Brutish violence was the way they enforced that peace. Linstan was lucky when he didn't have to pay with the black eye that served as the customary exit fee. The guards seemed unwilling to let you leave without suffering some damage to your face. He would usually need an extra day or two to heal since a freshly bruised face was the mark of a Megarian, or worse, a refugee from another realm. While the other kingdoms were more civilized than Megaris, none of them welcomed travellers and would take care to let visitors know that on no uncertain terms.

Because of the difficulty both entering and exiting Megaris, this was where most of his messages were delivered. People preferred the risk of an undelivered message to paying the travelling fee of a broken nose. While he couldn't blame them, he did wish they would do their business elsewhere. Like Thalden and its snowy, barren lands that could only coax a few guards to patrol its borders.

Linstan was relieved when he made it all the way into the first town on his list without incident. People in Megaris travelled in numbers to deter guards from hassling them. He would be able to make the rest of his stops with companions and avoid injury.

After delivering the first letter, he bought provisions at the closest store. He knew that he would be headed back to the safety of his tunnel tomorrow evening after he'd dropped off the next two letters. The most dangerous part would come soon, when he stole the outgoing mail. It was left for him to deliver, but it was also watched by the guards. They were just as wary of news leaving their

kingdom as they were of it coming in.

The next two messages, though sent from different families in different kingdoms, were going to the same address. Linstan had only delivered multiple letters to one other address. The Cranton family wrote each other regularly and their parents lived in Persheen. This meant Linstan delivered at least two letters to them every time he visited. They were the only people he saw often enough to be familiar.

He stayed the night with the family of a fellow messenger. He couldn't imagine ever leaving Megaris as a citizen. The brutal, paranoid guards suspected everyone trying to leave of being a spy. He also couldn't imagine being a successful Megarian messenger. The people of Megaris had the crest of the kingdom on their wrists which made it rather difficult to blend in as a native of another kingdom. Travelling to Megaris always made Linstan glad that he had not been born there.

The travel to the next town had been frustrating. His companions were staunch nationalists who lectured Linstan on the importance of showing pride. One of them actually had the crest tattooed on his face. He had been off getting provisions when Linstan had met them. He never would have joined them had he seen the face tattoo. It was nationalists such as these that were dangerous. These were the types that would call the guards if they suspected a messenger. He was glad that he only had two messages which were easy to hide in his coat. He left his unpleasant company to deliver his messages as soon as they made it past the guard.

After the large man who was the recipient of the letters invited him inside, as was customary since delivering letters in the open was suicidal, he excused himself and told Linstan to wait in the sitting room. This was strange,

but sometimes people wanted to give him something for his trouble, so he walked into the sitting room and sat in a comfortable chair, messages still in hand. People usually had whatever they wanted to give him in hand when he arrived. In case of suspicious eyes, a messenger would stay at least a few minutes to give the impression of a visiting friend, but they would usually just stay in the entry way.

Then Linstan realized it. The silence. The sound of betrayal. He had been so distracted by planning how to pick up the outgoing mail, he hadn't been paying attention to how long the man had been gone. But now Linstan was aware of the void of sound and hoped that he had noticed in time.

Those working for the guard, those who would send themselves letters to entrap messengers, were not unheard of, but they were rare. Linstan had only encountered a few himself, and had been able to smell their trap and escape without difficulty.

There was a saying among travellers and messengers in particular, "A first encounter was also a last encounter." The reason you never heard about an encounter was not because no one had ever run into the trap before, it was because no one had survived to warn others. The idea was not to walk into a suspicious situation in the first place so as not to end up facing your last encounter.

He got up and crept toward the door and peeked through the window beside it. He saw guards still making their way down the road toward the house. This was not a relief. It said nothing of guards that could already be in place at the back door.

Linstan ran toward what he hoped would be a kitchen with a back door. As he feared, there were two guards already at the back. They were turned away from the door, apparently having a smoke break. If he was lucky, he

would be able to sneak into the neighboring yard without incident.

He was not lucky. He was halfway across the yard when he heard a guard shout, "Hey!"

He started running toward the fence at the back of the yard. He jumped over it and ran toward the woods ahead of him. He knew if he could make it into the woods, he would probably get away. However, there was a good stretch of field before the woods started and he didn't know what sort of weapons the guards were carrying.

He noticed that he still had the fake messages in his hand. He was about to toss them away when he thought better of it. Being able to pass around the handwriting and address could save the lives of other messengers he might run into. He stuffed them into his inner coat pocket as he finally got to the edge of the woods.

Knowing addresses of known traps had saved his own life on several occasions, and he had even recognized handwriting on a fake letter once. It would be foolish to throw these away. The return addresses were likely also traps. Often messages did not have return addresses on the outside. Relations between some kingdoms were worse than others. Just having a letter from Thalden was a crime punishable by death in Persheen. Linstan usually discarded any "suicide notes" before he even returned to the tunnel.

Linstan collapsed on the soft grass inside the tunnel, panting until he caught his breath. He had run all the way here and his lungs felt like they might explode. The guards must have been particularly thirsty for blood because they had chased him pretty deep into the woods before finally giving up. When he had gained a lead away from them he had climbed high into a tree. He could hear them nearby, but they couldn't find him and he eventually heard the sound of them leaving. After climbing out of the tree, he

made his way back to the mail pick-up. It was left unguarded since the guards were busy looking for him elsewhere or believed he had already escaped. Not wanting to test his good luck, he checked carefully for guards laying in wait before running the whole way back to the tunnel. He didn't want to risk any of them following him. It was a safe route as long as it remained forgotten. If guards, especially Megaris guards, started patrolling it, it would be transformed into the most dangerous place in all of Delvia overnight.

He sat up and began sorting through the letters. He was glad to see most of them were for Thalden and Stoll. Stoll was his birthplace and he was glad he would be visiting home.

He never had a problem entering his own kingdom, and he certainly never had to withstand violence. He had served on the guard before the war and was friends with many of the captains. The times when a young guard with something to prove caught him, he would get taken to one of his friends who would warmly greet him, and the embarrassed guard would trudge away dejected.

Only once had he needed to prove his loyalties to Stoll. And as a native citizen, that had been easy.

People from Stoll were very easy to identify, although those from other kingdoms did not know this. On the bottom of each Stollish foot, the left one, was a symbol that had been tattooed at birth. The symbol represented the family they belonged to and only those born in Stoll could receive it. While immigrants were allowed to get markings to show they were permanent residents loyal to Stoll, only those born in the kingdom with native or loyal parents were marked with the official ink. It was only visible, glowing white, when exposed to special lights and the effect could not be duplicated.

Only those from Stoll would ever request that you

check their foot to prove their loyalty. Anyone who did not ask for this was easily identified as a foreigner and was usually turned away. This simple secret made Stoll the safest kingdom in the realm.

He hoped there wouldn't be many outgoing messages when he got home so that he'd be able to stay a while.

Linstan placed the messages carefully in his bag along with the provisions he had acquired. As eager as he was for his homecoming, he had to stop in Thalden and Caldos on his way. Entering Thalden would be easy as long as he was wearing warm enough clothing to survive the horrible weather. He kept a set of clothes in the tunnel for when he stopped there. And while he didn't need special clothing to survive Caldos, travelling there came with its own list of dangers.

He stood up, slung his bag across his shoulders, and started on his journey. He smiled as he watched the ever changing pattern of sunshine and shadow on his arms as he walked. He began whistling, adding his own tune to the twittering of the birds.



ANOTHER HAPPY ENDING

Martha sat at her desk, gazing at the posters hanging in her office, marveling at the sameness of it all. The solar system still hung there, an old version that included Pluto, and another that wished the force would be with her. A breeze generated by the air conditioning caused her paper Firefly model to swing gently and her to put on a sweater.

Everything looked the same. The people all looked the same. Jenny was wearing one of the horrendous frumpy sweaters she was fond of, Peter was making inappropriate jokes a bit too loudly at the copier, her boss was walking the floor causing people to pretend to work as he passed them.

She was the only one who knew anything was different. She found the sameness to be miraculous. There was not even the smallest detail to arouse suspicion.

Martha smiled to herself. Only she knew what she had done. Only she would ever know what she had done.

She hadn't doubted she would be able to do it. Despite the million little things that could have gone wrong, she knew that she would be able to pull it off. But knowing you can do something and actually pulling it off were two different things. She was quite proud of herself.

Jackson and his obnoxious leer leaned against her desk as he said, "You look tired. What were you up to last night?"

"Wouldn't you like to know? What do you want?"

"Latest status report, of course," he said, smiling.

They had this exchange all the time. She was always tired and he was always an asshole, but she saw no reason to be mean to him. She suspected he might even genuinely be interested, and although she didn't reciprocate his feelings there was no reason to be nasty. But today she was exhilarated by the exchange; the way nothing had changed except what she had been up to last night. Usually that was just the way she avoided revealing that she was so pathetic that she had spent most the night working on her simulated city. She was the mayor after all; her sims depended on her.

But last night she hadn't done that at all. And if only he did know what she had been up to last night. Would he recoil in disbelief? Would he avoid her? He certainly wouldn't leer at her the way he did now. She suppressed the smile of glee her secret evoked.

"Here ya go, Jacks," she said, handing him the report.

"You're a doll," he said, and walked off to go leer at someone who would enjoy it. Maybe someday she would take him up on the promises contained in his wicked smiles, the "accidental" brush of his hand. Maybe she would reveal her secret. Which would mean he'd have to become a secret. She nearly giggled at the thought.

It was so strange to feel so brand new on the inside, to have everything feel different, but look exactly the same. She wore her same old skin and hair and teeth and clothes as the perfect disguise. The idea of it made her giddy.

Just seven days ago she had a broken and hurting inside that was heavy and painful when she moved.

"Maybe we should get married," she had suggested to him last week. Joe had looked surprised for a moment, then smiled. Her heart beat faster as he waited for the response; for him to say they should. He chuckled and stroked her

cheek.

“You know I’m not the marrying type, babe,” he kept smiling and had given her hand a squeeze. It felt like he had squeezed the life out of her heart.

It wasn’t that she had killed him. She hadn’t taken action against him so much as let him die.

He had changed his mind too late. Well, actually it hadn’t been too late. Not if she hadn’t unplugged the phone. Not if she had driven him to the hospital.

He hadn’t come home for two nights, so she was surprised to see him stumble out of the bathroom and fall to the floor. She just stared at him, shook her head to try to clear the vision of him laying there forcing each breath. Even after she knew she wasn’t hallucinating, she just watched him crawl toward the phone on the end table. He must have taken some concoction of pain killers. She realized he was so far gone he hadn’t heard her come in; didn’t know she was there. It was like being on the viewing end of a one-way mirror. With no one watching she didn’t have to make the appropriate reaction, she just observed.

He pulled himself up to the table edge, then stopped to rest from the effort. He grabbed the phone and she watched him dial nine as she quietly rushed to the other side of the room and pulled the plug from the wall. She had always hated how the plug had been ugly and exposed. She wanted to cover it with the end table, an antique that was too heavy for her to move by herself. But Joe thought it looked fine and wouldn’t help her.

When he pressed the second “one” in the emergency call, he let himself fall. That would be enough, they would have to respond. Or they would if she hadn’t pulled the plug. She leaned against the empty wall and looked on as he lay there, eyes closed, forcing each diminishing breath. He’d

stopped breathing for a few minutes before she plugged the phone back in and called the ambulance.

She would need to be crying when they got there. She would need to ask if she could ride with them. She walked through the motions of what she would have done if she had found him like this. If she cared. She shook him harder and harder. She pretended to listen for breath. She sat by his side, held his hand, and cried. The paramedics walked in on this scene and she played the part of distraught lover.

He’d stopped breathing for a few minutes before she plugged the phone back in and walked over to him. She touched him, and felt he was still warm. She wondered how long it took before he’d be cold. How long before his body became stiff?

She wanted him to just be gone. She wanted to dismiss his existence the way he had dismissed her seven days ago.

At funerals even the nastiest wretches were remembered as saints. All wrong and unkindness was absolved. But Joe would not have a funeral. He didn’t deserve to be remembered sweetly.

She dragged him down the hall, into the elevator, out of the elevator and into her car. She drove for a while with him laying across her back seat. She needed to find somewhere he wouldn’t be found. At least not before he’d decomposed enough to be unrecognizable.

She drove until all she could see was the road illuminated by her headlights, though she knew there were grassy fields stretching on forever to either side of her. She turned off the road and into the field. She turned off her lights and just held the wheel steady. She drove for a mile, then stopped. She dragged Joe out of the backseat, got back in the car and drove back to the road.

It was late when she’d gotten home and she was still

exhausted when she woke up.

Martha decided to take a nap during lunch, still tired from dragging Joe around last night. She got a blanket out of her trunk and climbed into her back seat. It smelled faintly of Joe's cologne and she breathed him in as she drifted to sleep.