GIFTEN



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SUZAN

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My First Testimonial

I touch the pencil to my tongue as I have seen our Recorder do so many times, and begin to write down Logan's words, committing them to the rough paper sheets, to be read by people I will probably never meet.

It is impossible to feel anything but joy on a day like today. The Field, in the late summer sunshine, sparkles. I watch our friends bend to the task of repairing their cabins in time for the winter frost and the young ones collecting fat windfall from swollen apple trees, their mouths stained purple from gorging on blackberries. Their laughter trills through the Woods, even now, when you feel that your world is about to end.

My own story is a simple one, Ruthie.

My mother recorded the voices of our northern land and that job, on her death, fell to me. My own death, and yours, will not silence our stories. I record them for all who come after, so they will know we rejoiced as much as we suffered.

Do not forget they are the words of real people whose hands worked the earth and raised their children, whose voices hold within them every word of wisdom you will ever need, every comfort.

Is it lonely work? Tiring? Of course. But I ask for help and help is often given: willing hands keep the wheels of my old yellow solar turning; the papermakers are generous and there is a woman who crafts charcoal into sturdy pencils just for me.

I put away the idea of a One and Only a long time ago, when I was little more than a child. When your head is full of the lives of others, what can you offer of yourself? It might be different for you.

From the Lakes to the Hebrides, from the smallest communities to the vast; from inland, to the coasts and even to the City, and in all weather, I follow paths, tracks and cratered roads to gather stories as if they were pigment to paint a picture of our world. So much strength and resolve, so much despair and searing pain—all this will make a fine canvas of lives lived in constant renewal.

I'm not impartial. How can you record the resilience of our people and remain detached? Ever since the Darkening the challenges have been great. And I'm only human.

My ancestors witnessed the destitution of our land and also, its slow revival. While I rejoice in our growth, it is with grief that I have had to record the hunting of the Giften all these years and the tales of those who would protect them.

You have come to a fork in the road, Ruthie, and you will take the new path. You will see new things. And meet new people.

You listen well; maybe the life of a Recorder will suit you. Let this be your first record.

LOGAN—THE RECORDER

Prologue

Joshie was fourteen when the MAGs took him.

He was my favourite older boy when I was a smallie, we all wanted to play with him and he never chased us away. We laughed at his bad jokes and helped him with his chores when he would let us. His hair, the colour of wheat, had a way of flopping down over his eyes when he laughed. His smile revealed a dimple in one cheek.

In the weeks after, my dreams were strange, violent things. I'd wake up with lingering shouts of defiance ringing in my ears, still panting from dream-running through thick woodland, chasing after my friend who was being dragged away by men with guns.

But I didn't chase after him. I didn't do anything. No one did.

The edges of the thick forest circling our land were ankle deep with autumn leaves that day. Stace and I were playing, in the reds, yellows and golds, the sun glinting off everything it touched. She thought we were too old to *play* at eleven, but Joshie changed her mind about that

when he nudged us into a game, chasing us further into the Woods. Hide and seek turned into catch-me-if-you-can, and soon enough we were all running around the Hollow Oak.

Stace caught me, tripped me up and she and Joshie began to pile on the leaves. I held still, because this was also part of the game. If you're caught, you get buried and then, you get to burst out like a thunderstorm. The smell of autumn leaves, the feel of the earth at my back, the sun on my skin—all of it as real as the moments that followed.

I was still under this crunchy blanket when I felt Stace's kick.

"Ruthie! Our mums are calling."

I scrambled, but she and Joshie were already running out of the Woods and into the Field. And there was Mum, shouting my name.

The sun was setting over the row of cabins, the sky full of pink. Wood smoke trailed out of our chimneys, curling, white. Stace was already halfway across the Field, bare legs paddling to keep up with her mum, but Joshie was waiting for me, one foot in the Woods, the other in the Field.

"What's going on?" I panted, bent double, hands on my knees. But Mum's eyes were on Joshie, not me.

"Run!" she shouted at him. "Get out of here!"

"What?" he said, taking a step.

"Joshie!" Amy, his mum, her face as red as the autumn leaves, streamed past Mum, folding him into her arms, her mouth at Joshie's ear, whispering urgent words. Mum's

hand was tight around my arm as she started to run for the cabins.

"They've come for the Offering," she panted. "You need to get inside."

The MAGs were here.

Mum slowed down, dropping my arm as we passed the MAGs, their black solars parked outside Dev's cabin, next to ours.

Three MAGs; giant insects, in their uniforms of black. Their holstered guns and hard bodies made my heart bang harder. The adults were gathered around the solars; the MAGs were shouting, pointing at the hessian sacks of fresh veg, earthen containers of dried fruit and cloth-wrapped packets of smoked deer meat. The Offering—*our* food. But that summer had been especially good to us, the harvest was plenty enough to see us through the bad weather *and* to make the Offering. They should be happy, I thought, bitterly, but something else was going on here, something bad enough to make the mums call us home.

As I climbed the porch steps, Mum at my back nudging me to go faster, the voices grew louder. A very tall MAG stepped up to Dad, shouted into his face. I caught the word *Giften*.

"Stay inside!" Mum hissed and then she was gone.

From my bedroom window I watched the MAG aim his gun at the sun and fire. I covered my ears as everyone scattered. The crack bounced off the trees and the high peal of a baby's scream ripped through the air. Baby

Amaya was thrust above the heads of the small crowd by strong arms, MAG arms. She writhed and shrieked. The giant MAG swept his gun across the frightened faces of my community.

Joshie and his mum raced up their porch steps and slammed the door. The baby carried on squirming, screaming while Daisy, her mum, clawed at the MAG's arms.

"Let her go. Please!"

Everyone but the baby fell silent when the back door of a MAG solar swung open and from behind darkened windows a woman emerged.

I had never seen her before, but we all knew who she was. My heart had been thumping hard, but now it felt like it had stopped.

The first thing that struck me about her was how clean she was. Her clothes weren't made from other clothes sewn together like ours. She wore a pale blue shirt, a copper brooch pinned to a crisp collar; grey trousers with a sharp crease. Her red boots shone in the low afternoon sun. Even though she looked quite old, she had a young girl's hair, long, straight and yellow, which fell down her back, untroubled by the breeze.

"Let's all take a moment, shall we?" she said. Her voice was sweet, soothing. She gestured for the baby, holding out her arms.

"What's your name then?" she asked, cradling Amaya. The adults were silent. Dad's arm circled Mum's shoulders, drawing her close.

"Amaya. She's my daughter," Daisy said, through her sobs.

"And I'm Saige Corentin," she said. "Oh, come now. You don't have to be like that."

Defiant, unsmiling faces stared back at her.

Amaya had stopped crying; something about Saige Corentin had transfixed her.

"We came for the Offering, which you have given us. I wanted to meet you, you and the other communities, and to tell you that you needn't fear us." She glared at the tall MAG. "Put that away," she snapped.

He holstered the gun but kept his hand on the grip.

"Your Offering is sizable this season, my men tell me." Saige held Amaya aloft and Amaya giggled. "It's too big for such a small community." She smiled at Amaya's mum. "Daisy, is there a Giften in the Field?"

Daisy shrank back, her eyes flicking to the faces of the small crowd.

"Do you need some incentive, my dear?" Saige's voice was low, but still loud enough for me to hear its sickly sweet tone.

Daisy grabbed her arm as she made to climb back into the car with Amaya. The MAGs moved in.

"Stand down!" Saige snapped. Amaya was on her hip now, playing with the long strands of her blonde hair. "Yes?" she said, her head inclined towards Daisy, who swallowed hard, before she leaned in to speak into Saige's ear, her arms outstretched for her baby.

The heads of every adult in the community turned towards Joshie's house.

I didn't understand what was happening, but it had something to do with my friend. Amy's red face, her urgency, Mum telling him to *run*.

As I raced down the porch steps, the MAGs were shoving my friends, my family, aside. One ran ahead to Joshie's cabin, kicking open the door, while the others held the community back with raised weapons. I reached Dad just as Joshie was pushed out of the cabin. Amy hung on to him as the giant MAG started to drag him away. She tripped on the porch steps, got up again, shouting, "*No, please,*" until the butt of a gun cracked against her skull. She went down and stayed down.

"*Joshie!*" I screamed as he was hauled off the ground and dragged towards the solars. All of us were yelling, cursing the MAGs, cursing their guns.

The sky was even pinker now; the Field looked impossibly beautiful in this light; our faces bathed in the glow of a perfect evening.

"You have nothing to be scared of." Saige Corentin's voice cut through our pleas. "I am rebuilding the City. And I have people to feed. Your Offerings and your Giften make that possible."

A MAG appeared at her side, opening the back door of her solar.

"Any Circle here?" she said to him, her eyes sweeping over our faces.

Dad flinched, his grip on my arm suddenly painful.

The MAG shook his head. “We should go, doctor,” he said. “We’ve got everything we need.”

The sun glinted off the brooch on her collar, the embossed image of an open palm. “No members of the Circle here? Your revolutionary zeal is disappointing, I have to say.” She laughed and climbed into the car. “We will forfeit the next Offering from the Field,” she said, before pulling her door shut and disappearing once more behind the black glass.

Joshie, on the backseat of the second solar, struggled with the giant MAG.

When the cars pulled away, Dev started to run after them. I screamed, trying to wrench free from Dad, but he wouldn’t let me go.

A MAG leaned out of the window and fired a gun into the sky and Dev stopped dead. His chest heaving, he turned around and screamed his rage into our faces; they had taken his best friend and we had done nothing to stop them.

* * *

And then it was dark and I was in bed. Dad loomed over me, arms folded tight across his chest, while Mum cried next door.

“Why did you let them take him?” I whispered. I could barely see him in the gloom. A single yellow candle

sputtered on my nightstand, threatening to go out any second.

"I didn't *let them*." His voice broke.

"I didn't know he was Giften."

"No one should have known," he sighed.

We both jumped as the wind thumped against my window. It was black outside, not even the pointy silhouette of the treetops showed against the moonless sky.

I sank back into my bed as Dad shook out my crumpled blanket and covered me.

"It was the food; we gave them too much. It was our own stupid fault; *we* made them suspicious." He was talking to himself now. I thought of the screaming baby—swapped for the Giften boy. "Something needs to change. *We* need to change." He headed for the door.

"Dad," I said, "if we had Circle here, would they have stopped her?" I watched his head fall to his chest. His voice was husky, low.

"Maybe."