

Tenure

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Monday

The front door opening and closing were heard throughout the house, even as Morgan lay in bed, now waking to the metallic workings of the deadbolt being charged. She rolled over to her left side, her feeling a kick from her belly under her right hand. Tired features couldn't hold back the smile she felt, it seemed to her that their baby was also waking from in her womb to the sounds of daddy coming home.

The footsteps made their way down the hall, reaching the bedroom door before she had time to prop herself on her elbow, waiting for the door to open. Jensen's silhouette appeared as the door cracked open and her husband walked into the room. As most nights, he was slouched, his steps had a profound lack of grace, *cloncking*. If anyone could look like they were crawling while walking, he certainly did.

"Hey babe," Morgan's voice opened the silence like a blow horn in their little studio.

Jensen didn't say anything, his only greeting being the laying down behind her. His hand met hers over where the baby had kicked. She felt his chin rest on his shoulder, the rhythm of exhaustion flaring in and out his nostrils.

She knew such silence from him meant a rough day turned hard. "How bad was it?"

"They captured another two," Jensen's voice shook, she didn't like the sound of it. On the verge of tears already.

"Who was it this time?" she moved her hand from his, up and over her shoulder to his cheek, craning her neck to see the dark outline of his face in her periphery.

"A little girl this time, and her father, no more than seventeen, and..."

"And what?"

"They cut down our rations, even after I explained to them you were pregnant."

Morgan clenched her teeth to that, worry now exhaled from her nostrils. "We'll make it work somehow."

She rolled over, where they both faced each other in the darkness, Jensen's hands cradling the bulge in her belly. Her own hands held his face against her chest, stroking her index finger over behind his ear. It had been a soothing gesture passed down from mother-in-law to daughter-in-law. When the Old World had perished and his family had to be left behind.

Morgan never thought Jensen's mother liked her, she supposed the woman thought her son could've always done better. Falling in love with "street trash" as the woman had so elegantly put it. But now, Morgan supposed they were all street trash now, hungry workers scraping by. By the end, when the hordes of the undead had forced their hand and them to abandon her in-laws who couldn't run in their old age; something had changed. Hope maybe, hope that some light shined in the darkness and for the first, and last time Jensen's mother gave Morgan her blessing.

So she stroked behind her husband's ear, comforting him as she hummed a hymn she had learned from a woman who was native to the Yukon Province. A traditional hymn reserved for newborns and toddlers, and yet worked on the strained mind of the fully grown.

"Were you able to arrest any of them?"

"No," Jensen was now fading off into sleep, his voice slurred as she continued to stroke that magic spot on his head. "They're an elusive bunch, the Captain said they're working on that. But it doesn't change the fact that those two, right now are..."

She shushed him, resting her head over his. Her humming rose just a hair over Jensen's voice, over his worry. There was nothing they could do for the doomed, the best they could do was use what little time they had to rest. She knew that the day's events were just a scratch on the surface of other worries plaguing him. It hadn't just been Jensen's mother who disapproved of her. But a group of people who didn't fancy taking in outsiders into the new state wouldn't either; capturing and trafficking outsiders, such as her and Jensen.

"Had anything strange caught your attention today?"

"No, and it won't tomorrow either."

"I'm gone before you wake up, and I'm back after you sleep without any assurance you're safe. I get scared you won't be here when I wake, that you'll be..."

"But I'm still here."

"For now." His voice drifted off into sleep, and soon she joined him in rest; his hands cradling her belly, as hers cradled him.

Tuesday

As with every day, Jensen was gone when Morgan woke. The warmth on the mattress from where he had already gone cold. Morgan laid her hand over where his chest would've been, readying herself for the days' worth of solitude ahead of her. Pregnancy had spared her from any duties of labor, but her contributions remained to the new, but fledging State of Alyeska. Her belly rumbled as she got out of bed, the thought of food gave her waves of nausea but the hunger rumblings remained.

"I know. I know." A smile dressed her lips, holding her hand over her side, the same placement that Jarred often held.

She got up and found the tattered remains of elastic band bottoms and a blouse. Slipped into them and ventured out of the bedroom. Her first stop had been to the front door, two baskets laid full; one of wool from muskox, and the other of hide ready for tanning. She hauled the baskets in, her contribution for the duration of her pregnancy was tanning hide into leather, and weaving blankets; the latter of which was in high demand. More people were flooding into the state than could be provided for, and people needed to stay warm.

There wasn't much in the ways of electricity for the whole population, but Jensen had the fortune of salvaging a cast iron box he converted into a stove for them. The fire kept the studio warm. She stopped in the kitchen and prepared a cup of oatmeal; seeing that their kettle was missing. A second later she found it sitting on their cast iron stove, the smell of coffee suppressed by the burning wood. She looked inside to see that enough coffee remained for a cup. If there was anything in the new state they had no lacking of, it was coffee beans. It was the only thing Jensen had exclusive rights to, to help get him through the day. But this morning, he must've been feeling extra generous, and so Morgan sat down on a creaking rocking chair. Oatmeal and coffee in hand, in their sitting room.

-0036 hours-

Every night it was the same story. Morgan would wake up, hear her husband's arrival, and would stay up to talk to him for as long as their tired souls would let them. It was her favorite part of the day, and though his body odor stunk the room without time, or the soap needed to bathe, she grew accustomed to it. He laid behind her, his hand over her belly as if

looking and waiting to feel a kick. A creeping fear plagued her, that he would get burned out to the point of his soul being incinerated, like the wick of a candle too soon turned to ash.

“Is this gonna be our lives forever?” His voice slurred passed a parted throat and dry lips, already falling into slumber.

“It’s gonna be okay.” She said, taking his hand in hers, stroking her thumb over the fore of his hand, another soothing spot of his. “It’ll be okay.” She felt her own eyes tear up.

“Did you get enough to eat today?”

“I did, as much as I could ration.” She lied, their lowered rations meant lowering their daily food. It was another fear of hers, that their baby was malnourished inside of her.

“Thanks for the coffee.” She added feeling herself fading into sleep.

Startled awake by the simple response of his that would keep her awake for the next several hours: “What coffee?” his voice trailed off, the roots of sleeping dug too deep into his consciousness to pull from.

She had little time, rolling over to face him, as his eyes fluttered. “The cup you left me this morning, in the kettle.”

“I didn’t have time for coffee tis mernin,” and he was gone. The shutters of his eyelids were pulled down by the weight of the bags under them.

Wednesday

Morgan had woken earlier than normal, in a state of in and out, where ten minutes could pass in what felt like a second between blinks. She rolled over in one of those ten-minute-long seconds, and Jensen wasn't there. Up earlier than normal, but in their bathroom, she could hear the clanking of a bucket, and the scrubbings of him bathing.

She fell back, ten minutes later waking up to the sight of their bedroom door closing and the sounds of footsteps disappearing down the short corridor to the front door. Either from her dipping back into sleep, or Jensen just not going to work, she never heard the door open or close. Figuring the former, a second passed in another span of ten minutes.

When she did get up, the sun was rising, shining through her window as she sat up in bed. Nauseous in sync with her hungry stomach, while one person didn't want to eat the other sure did. So it continued, same old, same old. Only today was Wednesday and the only day that Jensen was relieved of his duties earlier than normal. A day when she and he had time to spend together that wasn't interrupted by sleep.

Getting up, feeling more pep in her steps, she couldn't hold back her grin, ready to get her duties for the day out of the way. Walking past the bathroom where her smile turned to a grimace, holding her nose at the horrid stench leaking out the open door. She pulled her nightgown over her nose and peered into the bathroom. It was as clean as it had always been, except for the bathtub. There were no utilities, including running water, so they scrubbed with bars of soap and a rag; good thing the plumbing was still functional.

Only they had no bars of soap, their supplies were late. But then again, it wasn't too far out of the realm of possibilities that her husband was given some from a friend at work. Either case, she felt a tingle of fear creep up her nauseous belly. It could've been nothing, or could be something.

-2030 Hours-

Morgan sat on the old loveseat in the sitting room, the fire going on the iron stove. An army issue cup-canteen filled with tonight's dinner kept warm on the stovetop. She sat on the couch with her cup canteen already devoured. Preserved elk meat, diced carrots, and potatoes, in a salty broth. Normally they'd have more meat to add to their stews, but with the lowered rations the small two-ounce chunk of elk meat had to feed two people. Simple ingredients of flour, salt,

and baking soda made their sides of hardtack with their stew and water she collected from distilling.

Jensen came home, at the usual time he did on Wednesdays, dressed in his Military Police Fatigues. Getting relieved from his duties earlier than usual gave his face a pleasant smile; a smile that was weighed down by another hard day burdening his soul, he grabbed his cup-canteen and slumped next to her on the couch.

Morgan curled up next to him, “Who’d they capture today?”

“An elderly lady, with dementia.” Jensen’s voice cracked, and he buried his face between her neck and the couch.

She kissed the side of his face and started to stroke behind his ear. Already knowing the answer to her next, proverbial question. This group of traffickers captures another outsider, and the MPs weren’t able to arrest a single one of them.

“We don’t know how to combat this,” Jensen cried, “We’re up to one thousand people captured across the whole state. Reports from Anchorage say that today twenty people were taken overnight from one bunkhouse. Word is coming from the top that the country will be sealing off its borders before long.”

“But we’ll be safe, right? They would extradite preexisting outsiders?”

“I don’t know. Rations are said to be getting cut lower even more. You’re gonna have to start eating my portions.”

“Wha, no.”

“You need the food more than I do.” he pulled away, looking at her eye to eye. “I’ll figure something out while I’m at work, maybe the Captain can manage to pull some ration shares for military personnel.”

“Baby, if you don’t eat. Then you don’t work, and if you don’t work, then our child won’t be fed.”

“That’s a worry for later, but tonight. I want you to eat,” he said closing her hands around his cup-canteen. “I know you hide it, but you’re losing weight. I can’t have that, compare to this,” a rueful smile frowned at his lips holding her belly, “I come last. Promise me that you’ll eat my portions. For him, or her.”

She wiped a tear from her eye, and much to her regret, and her shame a hidden hint of relief, she nodded. Resting her forehead against his.

They made love that night, for once resting as they slept. Morgan, warm in Jensen's arms, thought about how lucky she had been. Happy about how wrong her parents had been of Jensen, and in his embrace how warm and safe she felt. Only when she started to fall back asleep, for the first time that night, she noticed the smell of his body odor. It didn't smell of a day's worth of work, but of several days' worth of collective stench.

She had forgotten to talk to him about the bathroom but didn't want to bring it up now. They were restful, and contemptuous, if only for a few hours. They would spend the rest of the night in silence. Feeling his thumb stroking over her belly, a kick came to her side and they both chuckled at the feeling.

Next Wednesday

-2315 Hours-

It wasn't every Wednesday that Jensen could come back home early, and the bad news of his extended shift never came with notice. Only when he never came home after eleven would Morgan know her husband had stayed at work late. Today had been such a Wednesday, and a day's worth of excitement withered in disappointment like a flower planted in rocky soil.

The candles had been blown, the fire stoked and she lay in bed. Not long after did she hear the front door unlock and the moaning of hinges followed ending by the latching and charging of the deadbolt. She smiled, leaning on her elbow her ears following the sound of each *thunks* of the footfalls prowling down the hall. She was now disappointed with herself for blowing out the candles.

That was fine, they could lie down and talk. Excitement boiled over when the door opened and the dark outline of a man entered the room. "Hey, baby, sorry I blew out the candles, was it the checkpoints that kept you late?"

He didn't respond, she could hear his tired grunts as he walked around the bed and laid down behind her. His hand rested over her waist and belly his thumb not stroking over her belly like usual.

Another hard day. A rueful smile weighed on her lips, feeling his breath down her neck.

The smell was familiar, the same stench from the bathroom a week ago. She grabbed his hand and felt his tired breath give way to sleep. *Poor guy*, she frowned and held his hand, dozing off herself.

-0032 hours-

The front door opening and closing could be heard throughout the house, even as Morgan lay in bed. What had been a sound heralding joy and excitement had tonight brought forth dreadful fear as she woke up to the sound. Hearing the metallic workings of the deadbolt being charged. She patted Jensen's hands resting on her belly still, frozen in fear.

"Honey, wake up." Morgan stuttered to form the words, "Som... someone in... in the house."

The footsteps made their way down the hall, sounding with each rhythm of her heartbeat. A timer ticking down, a profound lack of graceful steps, sounding off in heavy *clocking* with

every step reaching zero as the person stood outside their bedroom door. Nothing came from Jensen behind her.

She leaned up on her elbow, shaking at his arm. It seemed her fear kept her from moving further as the door knob turned.

“Jensen!” She cried, wide awake in an ice-cold panic.

“What’s wrong babe?” Jensen asked, as soon as the door opened.

Only her husband’s voice didn't come from behind her, her back became a freezing river of erecting goosebumps shooting up to her neck. Glowing in the warm candlelight in one hand, she saw her husband standing in the doorframe, who had come home late that night.