

Chapter 1 from the novella “Sammy’s Last Day”

I BUMP the new recruit in the back of the knee with the butt of my rifle. He’s moving too slow. The boy falls flat on his face in the dust. The gun he was issued just an hour ago, leaves his hands, and skitters across the dirt road. A good thing we haven’t shown them how to load the bullets yet.

“Up maggot!” I bellow close to his ear.

He lays there on the ground, his back bouncing. Dark circles in the dirt, announce the boy is crying. His pain ties a small knot in my throat but, I have to do this. I have to toughen him up, or he will fail fast in this organization he’s been thrust into.

“Didn’t you hear me? Stand up!” I turn him over with the toe of my boot.

He crosses his arms over his eyes to block out the blinding sun. Black skin coated in tan powder from the road, a skinny body drowning in the drab uniform we gave him. I don’t want to know his name. He’s still crying. Probably wants to hide behind the skirts of his mother. Who can blame him? He’s only nine.

Do any of my commanders see this? I glance to either side, and then a quick twist of the neck to check behind me. I could be punished for letting him weep like a baby. And he’ll receive a terrible correction if I don’t get him going again. How do I do this? If I yell and call him names, he’ll shrink further into his shell. If I beat on him he might start wailing, and that won’t be good for him or for me.

But if I’m kind, if I give him a hand up, and tell him everything will be all right, I’m doing him a disservice. Everything is not all right and never will be again for this boy. His parents are dead, victims of an endless civil war. His village reduced to ashes. With fresh blood on his fingers, he signed allegiance to our High Commander. A madman who cares nothing for the boy’s soul, but only how well he can hit a moving target with a rifle.

They told him he would be taken care of. Shown how to fight. He was promised he could have revenge on those who have ruined his life.

He’s me, eight years ago.

It seems every time we add to our number I have to relive my past in their eyes. I remember my father, pushing me to the front of the line to enlist. My mother’s silent tears, transferring onto my cheeks when she kissed me goodbye. My three younger siblings peeking out from behind her, begging me with huge eyes not to go. I signed up with the militia for one reason, to protect them. To do what

the government can't or won't. I wanted to make sure my brother and sisters could sleep at night without worry lines on their faces. I left my family, before I had whiskers on my chin, to keep them safe.

But when we marched through my village a half a year later all that was left of my family was their graves. Most days I wish I'd stayed and died with them.

A few weeks later, during a counter attack, one of my commanders pointed out a man who he claimed was responsible for the death of my family. I stopped his heart with a bullet, and then stole his feet so he couldn't walk into heaven and beg God to forgive him.

But, taking revenge didn't make me feel any better. I still miss my family as much as I ever did before. And I've often wondered how the commander knew it was that man who put my loved ones in the ground. What if he was mistaken, and it was a different soldier who murdered them? Maybe that's why I still don't have peace.

I want the wars to end so I can have a normal life. I want to go to school, learn to read, and find a wife. I hope there's a girl out there who would still have me, after the wretched things I've done. Women have soft hearts, there could be one willing to overlook my despicable acts as a soldier and love me as a man. My mother loved my father, and he wasn't without faults.

The sniveling little boy on the ground gets up on his own. He swipes his tears, turning the dust on his face into muddy streaks. I don't need to give him another order. He picks up his gun, and catches up with the other recruits. He falls in step, and blends in with the other boys, most of which will be dead by the end of the year.

"Did you notice how pretty the new girl is?" Lionel saddles up to me. He joined up a year before I did. We're two of the oldest in the ranks and made sergeant at the same time. I've known him longer than anyone else in this outfit, but I hate him.

I try not to sigh too loud. "No. They all look like little boys to me."

"Come on, man! See those lovely legs under the yellow skirt?" he says, tilting the barrel of his gun in her direction.

"I guess." I watch the tops of the trees.

"She'll be good for more than just cooking." His tone makes the insides of my ears feel slimy.

"She signed up to fight," I say, but it's a waste of time to try and convince a snake like him to respect a woman.

"Oh, they know when they volunteer what they are really wanted for." He issues a wicked grin.

I grip the handle of my gun, and my finger itches the safety. It takes a good deal of self-restraint

not to release it and turn my gun on Lionel. This won't be the first time he's taken advantage of a female recruit. I don't know how he rationalizes it. He had a sister once, and a mother. Doesn't he think of them when he violates women and girls? Don't the women of his family come to him in dreams and shame him?

I've never touched a girl without her permission, which means I've never really touched one at all. There was a girl with us for a while I had a strong attraction to. She was called Belvie. It wasn't just her looks, which were nice, but it was the way she carried herself caught my attention. Her shoulders always back, her chin high. She was quiet, until she decided what she wanted to say. Then, when she opened her mouth she spoke with such wisdom and authority even the High Commander took notice of her.

I believe Belvie could have been the first female in our outfit to rank up to sergeant, but she died seven months, two weeks, and four days ago. It wasn't in combat. Pneumonia took her life. We have no doctors, and medicine is scarce. Her death was such a waste. To think of such a strong person, losing her life to treatable illness. A rock of bitterness lodged in my chest the day Belvie breathed her last. Some days I massage the spot over my heart where it's stuck and miss her.

I often daydream that Belvie was more than just a fellow soldier. That she was my girlfriend, and kissed my lips. When I'm feeling really lonely, I picture the life we could have shared, sons and daughters we could have raised. In a different place, or another time, a life with Belvie could have been possible.

Our unit stops on the outskirts of town to get water. It's a very long walk to our camp, and there is no potable water source out there. Our camp was built in a secluded location, far from town, to keep us hidden from our enemies, but also to make it harder for the young ones to run home at the first sign of hardship. And it will get hard for them. I'd have run home many times in the first few months, if I could have.

The other sergeants and I sit on the bumpers of the trucks, and instruct the recruits fill the water jugs. We assign four boys to each 75-liter container. There's only two handles on the jugs, which makes it difficult for two of the boys to hold on. One boy, who doesn't have the luxury of a handle, loses his grip, and the container crashes to the ground. A dark river, flushes down the road. The boy who dropped his side of the jug, along with the other three who were carrying it with him, are punished. Knuckle push-ups. They are given a count of forty, but they can't do five of them yet. After a few useless attempts at the push-ups, a commander whips the backs of their legs instead.

The boy who caused the jug to fall is only seven years old. The youngest recruit I've ever seen. I

turn away from his wet eyes, and the snot running from his nose as he's beaten for not completing a task he was unable to do. I imagine his mother scooping him up, and carrying him away from this nightmare. I'll bet he's having the same daydream.

I walk a few meters up the street toward town. A steeple, with a cross at the top, catches my eye. A little girl sits on the top step, wearing a blue, flowered dress. She can't be much older than the boys being beaten behind me. She watches the torture, and jerks with every smack. Tears run down her cheeks, like the spilt water runs in the road. Seeing such barbarism through her innocent eyes, is almost unbearable, and tears spring in my eyes too. It's been a long time since I've cried. What is different about today? What is it about this little girl in the blue dress that disarms me?

I fake a yawn to explain the tears to anyone watching me, and a nun bustles out of the church and gathers up the little girl. She takes her inside, and my chest relaxes. I'm relieved she doesn't have to witness such an injustice anymore.

"Sammy!" Lionel's nasal voice oozes up the road. "Time to move out!"

"I'll be right there! Need to check something out first," I call.

Lionel says something to one of the commanders, and he looks at me. The commander gives me a nod. I've proved myself as trustworthy. He has no reason to doubt my claim of a potential threat I need to investigate

There is nothing to check on, of course. I just want to delay going back as long as I can. I climb the steps to the little church, and enter through the weathered doors. It's much cooler and dark in here. A welcome refuge from the afternoon sun. No one is in the sanctuary. This building isn't very big. Where did the nun and little girl go?

As I survey a painting of a saint, and a statue of the Virgin, I'm suddenly very aware of the gun in my hands. I slide the shoulder strap around to carry the weapon on my back. This leaves me open to attack, but who would do such a thing in the house of God?

I take a seat in one of the empty pews. I lean my arms on the row in front of me, and feel the desperate urge to say a prayer. But who do I pray to? And what do I say? I'm sure God ran out of patience with me a long time ago. Maybe a saint will listen, but I've only attended a Baptist church so don't know the names of any.

Shouting outside disturbs my peaceful moment. A gun shot, then two more. I hurry to one of the tiny windows in the entryway. It's obscured glass, but I can see forms of soldiers. A dozen or more. Not from my outfit.

Ga-ga-ga-ga-gun! An automatic is fired. Swinging my rifle back into my hands I squat down and

crack open one half of the double door. The new recruits are screaming and running in circles. I count three of them on the ground, blood pooling under their tiny bodies. Lionel has scampered up a tree. Coward. The other sergeants are barking orders. A bullet hits my friend Thomas in the forehead as he's trying to round up the young ones.

I close the door and stand up. What do I do? How many children could I save? I think of what happened to Thomas, not ten seconds ago. Wouldn't it just be suicide to try and rescue any of them? Should I die trying?

"Psst. Hallo!" someone whispers from the altar.

The nun who took the girl off the steps is calling to me from the front of the sanctuary. Another nun is with her. They signal me with their hands to come closer. I take a few careful steps up the center aisle. They encourage me by circling their hands faster. Telling me to hurry, I guess?

Boom! The doors to the Church are kicked open. I turn around. Three soldiers, I don't recognize, march into the sanctuary. Guns aimed at the women by the altar.

How dare they threaten servants of God? I fire, hitting one of them in the neck. As I aim for another one my trigger jams. In the delay, I catch a bullet in the chest. The impact shoots me backward, and then my body goes limp, filing in between two pews. I lay on my side, too shocked to move, as my blood spreads out beneath me.

There's no pain. Only peace. Relief that my time as a soldier is over.

Boots clomp up the aisle. I wait for the shot to the back of my head to ensure I'm dead. The nuns scream.

"Where do you keep the tithes and offerings?" a man barks.

More screaming and what sounds like the reciting of prayer.

"Where?" And he fires his automatic.

"Si prega di non rubare da Dio! Prega, prega!" one of the women begs.

The gun fires again. More pain filled shrieks, but only a single voice cries out this time.

"I'll kill you too!"

Shuffling and scrambling. More gun shots. The cries of the nuns cease. They must be dead. Stupid woman. She should have given them the money.

It's been quiet for a long time. I feel I've been covered in a blanket of ice, and I start to shiver. How long does it take to bleed to death?

Warm hands turn me over. I keep my eyes shut so I don't see the end of the barrel.

"Sei ragazzo vivo?"

I open my eyes. It's a nun, holding a rifle.

Is she going to finish me?

No. She extends a hand, and pulls me to my feet. Pain explodes where the bullet went in, and radiates out my fingers and toes as I stand. She helps me to the altar, and then to a small room behind it. She lowers me onto a small couch. Strong arms for such a tiny lady. The pain so unbearable, I black out and come to again.

Another nun, an ancient woman, shuffles in to the small room. She pulls my shirt away from the wound and begins to pack it with white rags. She also stuffs one in my mouth, so I won't yell. The pain causes me to lose consciousness again. And again.

"A essere in silenzio o si tornerà," she croaks. "Ti aiuterò," she says when I open my eyes again.

"Get a priest. Priest," I whisper, and clutch her arm.

She shakes her head. "Ti aiuterò. Sono un infermiere. Infermiere." She taps her chest with a gnarled finger.

How do I tell them that I want to die? That death the only way out for me?

I pass out again while she treats my wound.

When I regain consciousness, she has finished patching me up. The nun explains by using a statue of a saint for reference, and lots of hand gestures, that the shot wasn't fatal. The bullet exited out my back, so no surgery was required. This news is very disappointing. I don't get to escape this world today after all.

I sit up, despite her attempt to keep me down. With a spinning head, I tell her I need to find my commanders. Not that she understands a word I'm saying.

"Since I'm not going to die I have to find my unit or I'll be in big trouble," I tell her, and strain as I pick up my rifle. The pain in my shoulder thunders up to my ear, and I almost drop my weapon. I hug the gun to my side to secure it. I know I can't fire it with the use of only one arm, but I feel more secure with it in my possession.

My boots slide and scratch across the floor. I wobble, and lean on the wall for support. My head swims, and my vision jumps. It feels like I'm drunk, but without the urge to laugh or fight. The end of the pews are my supports as I tread down the aisle. I take quick glances out windows blurred windows, and peek out the front door. My unit is gone. I've been left behind. Not really a big deal. I know the way back to our camp. But is that where I want to go?

Today could be my break away after all.

I return to the back room, and stifle the urge to howl as I sit down. The burning and throbbing

in my shoulder is all I can feel. The nuns are gone. My blood has been cleaned from the vinyl. The freshly washed couch, the crisp, white bandage over my heart, everything is clean. This is the moment I decide to begin again. I lay down my rifle, and unwind like a spool of thread. Lie down on the couch and leave my worries behind. As I drift off to sleep I keep thinking, *I am free. God help me, I'm free!*

But what do I do now?

Chapter 2 (from the novella "Sammy's Last Day")

Fuzzy, green tongues flutter in the breeze outside a window above my head. Bunches of them without eyes, or noses, or heads. I don't like the way they mock me. I try to shift away from the them, but I'm stuck. Can't move. Not because of my shoulder, that doesn't hurt at all—the nun must have given me something powerful for the pain—but I seem to be bound in some way. Not by ropes, it feels like a cocoon. What is this?

Humming. A man is humming. Where did the nun go? I angle my head to the side, and find a blurry person rocking in a chair. Or am I swaying in my bed? Or is it both?

"Hello?" I sound like my throat was shredded by a lion's claws.

The rocking stops. The man transfers something from his hands to a table next to him, and claps.

"Yaya, Sammy!" he says and rushes to my bedside. He bumps into my side and I'm flying. No, I'm swinging. Suspended in a hammock bed, I think.

"Euen! Istos gospital Yaya, Sammy, yaya!" His face, a collection of fuzzy shapes. His hair, springy halo. I can't make sense of anything I see.

"Who are you?" I ask.

He rambles on, spouting more excited words I don't understand. Is this Italian, like the nuns were speaking? He seems happy and gentle. I don't sense a threat, but my muscles tense anyway. My limbs are sore.

"I can't understand you." I lick my lips and find them bone dry. The inside of my mouth isn't very wet either.

"Tene rennet peb! De erada cabira," he says and steps away.

"I'm thirsty, sir," I say.

"Yi, yi! Cabira, horie omisma."

A small, paper straw tickles my lips. I close my mouth around it and gulp. This isn't water. What is it? Tang? Juice? I've never tasted anything like it, but I'm too parched to care. He refills the cup, and

brings it back to me. My vision is clearing. The man has tan skin, and kinky hair like mine, but it's blonde. His nose is narrow and stubbed at the end. The linen shirt and leather vest he wears isn't the clothing of a priest. Who is this man?

"Where's the sister who helped me?" I ask after my third glass of "juice."

More Italian talk. What was I thinking asking him a question in Kituba? I try French. He smiles and blasts more strange words at me. I guess he doesn't speak French. I'm hesitant to use English. My knowledge of that language is limited.

He keeps talking and reaches out to touch my ear. I pull my neck back, he holds his palm out and lowers his voice to a soothing tone. Like one you would use with an infant. Then he reaches for my ear again, slower this time, and taps behind my right ear. I'm tired of this game and angle away from him.

His footsteps tell me he understands I don't want to talk anymore. I don't know where I am, or who he is, but I really don't care. As long as I'm clear of the militia, I'll be a pet for his children if that's what he wants me to. The militia. My unit. High Commander. My guts seize and tremble. Is he looking for me? I wriggle in my hammock and pick at the light blanket covering me. I gaze out the open window. The branches with a thousand tongues are teasing me again. I stiffen my upper lip, close my eyes, and find relief in sleep.

"Good morning, Sammy. Can you understand me now?"

Early sunlight shines its beams on my blanket, announcing a new day. The Italian man is back. And he's speaking Kituba today. How is this possible? He couldn't have learned an entire language overnight.

"Can you understand me, Sammy?"

He leans closer, squints, and waits for an answer. His eyes look wrong. Purple eyes, sparkling like jewels. Is the pain medicine making me hallucinate?

"Sammy, do you understand me?"

"Yes, sir." I say and almost salute him out of habit.

"Good!" A broad grin shines on his face. "They said the chip was fixed."

"Chip? Who said—what was fixed?"

"Oh, never mind that right now. How are you feeling?" He puts a warm hand on my forehead.

"I'm fine, sir. Where am I?"

The man pauses, and looks up as if he's considering what to say next.

"Are you a friend of the nun who treated my wound?" I ask.

"I don't know Nun, but I'm glad he helped you."

"Not someone named 'nun.' She *was* a nun, a holy sister. And a nurse, too. I think."

The man laughs. "My pardon please, I don't know Earther names and titles."

My pulse quickens. What does he mean Earther? What country is that?

"Oh, you look frightened! My pardon please, let's start over. I am Muluc. You're safe and welcome here. I will take care of you until you can take care of yourself."

This Muluc has rounded shoulders and thin arms. I was the thickest man in my unit. The strongest boy my commanders ever trained. Or that's what they told me. I could easily best this frail man in a fight if I need to force an escape. I look around the room. This isn't a cell. There isn't even a door to close me in, much less lock. Just a doorway that looks like it leads to a set of stairs. Two more hammocks hang in this room, but are currently empty. Who sleeps in those? More rescued soldiers? Maybe this is some kind of sanctuary for us.

"Do you think I might sit there?" I ask and point to a sturdy looking chair next to a dresser.

"If you feel up to it, we can try," he says, extending his arm to assist me.

Reaching out, to accept his help, I catch sight of my arm and gasp.

"What's wrong?" He searches my eyes. "Do you have pain?"

"No, sir. It's just . . . my arm. It looks different."

"How so?"

I'm embarrassed to tell him it looks skinnier than normal. My bulk is gone. How long have I been wasting away in this hammock? Or are my eyes deceived by the effects of pain medication?

"It's nothing." I shake my head. "How are we going to manage this with my injured shoulder?" I reach across to touch my wounded part. No bandage is there, just skin under my shirt.

Yanking my collar aside, and I scrunch my neck to get a look at my shoulder. I find no blood, no open wound. Just a round, pinkish scar. It's not much bigger around than my pinkie.

"You have a larger scar on your back," he says. "But the doctor says your injury healed nicely."

My stomach squeezes, and I close my eyes. "How long have I been in this hammock?"

He lays a comforting hand on my uninjured arm. "You have been with us, six months."

Six months? That's a lot of time to lose track of. A bullet to the chest wouldn't steal that much time from a man's head. What else is there to know?

"Am I sick?"

“No. You just needed to sleep.”

“For six months?” Panic rises from my ribs into my neck. My throat is closing. I can’t breathe.

“Easy, easy. I promise you all is well.”

“All is well? All is well?” I burst out. This Muluc person, can’t be serious. “How can you say that? I don’t know where I am. Who you are. I’ve lost a great deal of time. And how did you learn to speak Kituba so fast?”

I pant like I just stopped running. My head pounds. The tight feeling in my neck spreads down my chest again.

“Slow down, Sammy. A foot can’t take more than one step in a single stride. Why don’t we start with getting you to the chair?”

“No,” I say and face the wall. I shut my eyes, though I don’t feel like sleeping. I want to be left alone. I need some privacy. Can I ask this strange man to leave?

The rocking chair in the corner of the room creaks for a while. Then it stops. Soft feet pad across the room and down the stairs. He’s gone. Good, I need the space to think this through, figure out my plan. I left the militia for freedom. To be a man in charge of my own life. That’s still my goal, can I still achieve it here?

I work to sort through my options, but that doesn’t last long. I have no idea what my options might possibly be. What variables do I have to play with? What are the barriers I might face? Imprisoned by ignorance, it’s hard to breathe again.

I feel like I’ve been tossed into a deep river with a heavy stone tied to my ankle. I need information, but I’m not confident enough to leave the safety of this hammock to go find Muluc and interrogate him. There might be others in this house bigger than him. And I’m so small and weak. Six months in this hammock! I could barely defend myself against a beetle. When he returns, I’ll find out what I need to know. Next time Muluc comes in this room, I’ll get what I’m after. He will give me answers, and he’ll take as many "steps in one stride" as I want him to. I don’t need my strength. There are other ways to convince a man he wants to talk.

“Sammy’s Last Day” will be available on Amazon, September 2016!

(Keep reading. Chapter 2 from the novel “Tenderfoot” is on the next page)

Chapter 2 from the novel “Tenderfoot”

“It’s just for a couple of hours. Please, Papi?”

My gut aches as I beg like a brat. This is humiliating. All I want is one hike with my friends, and I’m ready for it.

“Doctor Paradia said I’m progressing well.” I mention the doctor to strengthen my case.

My adopted father stops wiping a bowl and tilts his head. He’s considering it! I sit forward, ready to jump if he gives the signal. *Come on, Papi!* He has to let me go. He was in the room when the doctor examined me. He heard what she wants me to do. Exercise. Movement. I’m burning for it.

But with a shake of his head, I’m defeated. I push out an angry sigh. Another day of wandering around the treehouse. I’ll explode before sunset.

“You’re not strong enough yet,” he explains, rinsing the last cup from breakfast.

“It’s been two months.” I grind my teeth

“Recovery from the Deep Sleep takes time. Here.” He turns from the sink, scoops cereal from a pot on the stove and pushes a bowl across the counter. Muluc is always pushing food at me. “Eat. That’s what you need,” he says, and winks one of his purple eyes.

Usually, I eat everything the man gives me, but I wrinkle my nose at this offer. The porridge was tasty an hour ago, but it’s just a lumpy, grey mess now. Scowling at the branches outside the window, I cross my arms and jiggle my knee. Lime-green leaves shaped like tongues seem to mock me. Daring me to defy Muluc. I could just go without permission. Descend the ladder and take off. Would he try to stop me?

It doesn’t matter. I’m not brave enough to test it. What if my new parents throw me out for disobeying? How would I survive without their help? In Earth World, I was considered a man. Here in this world of Enova? Weakness from the Deep Sleep has demoted me to a boy again.

“I’m going crazy cooped up all the time!” I say louder than I mean to.

“I’ll take you to the market with me later.” Muluc shrugs his narrow shoulders.

I roll my eyes.

“Exercise is good for me. The doctor said so!” My voice cracks, making me sound even more like

a kid.

“But a trip all the way out to hike the foothills? And so soon after awakening?” He shakes his head. “I don’t think that’s what she meant.” He pulls out pots and pans to prepare lunch even though he just finished cleaning up breakfast.

“Don’t worry, Papi Muluc.” My adopted brother, Heliz, enters the kitchen. “I’ll take care of him. And we’ll take a Chatty.”

“What if he gets muscle cramps? Or becomes too dizzy to walk?” Muluc wags one finger at Heliz. “Chatties do not operate well out there.”

“There are about ten of us going. All tough, strong Zantus.” Heliz flexes his biceps and crosses his eyes. He laughs at himself. I snort a laugh too.

“If we have to, we’ll carry ‘the weakling’ back to the ComTrans station.” He teases me with a smirk.

I grin at his challenge. Hopping off the stool, I shove Heliz sideways. He wraps his arm around my neck and puts me into a headlock. Twisting and wriggling, I escape and punch him playfully, in the arm. He responds with two hits to my shoulder and a light slap on my left cheek. I reach to tap him back, but he ducks out of the way. I chase him and we plunge around the kitchen, knocking over chairs, and revolving Muluc in a circle. A potted plant tips over, spilling dirt on the floor. The bowl of porridge goes flying. Finally, I apprehend him and we rumble on the floor until Muluc gives in.

“All right, all right! Take your brother for a hike. Just get out of my kitchen!” He shoos us away with his hands. Our feet do a quick celebration dance and then we take off before Papi Muluc has a chance to change his mind.

A short climb down the ladder and I’m on the ground. Awake. Free. Ready to run.

It’s only twenty minutes into the hike and I’m sorry I didn’t listen to Papi Muluc. Heliz charged on ahead with everyone else and left me wheezing in the dust. I’m not totally alone. A couple of the girls from our group stroll behind me, collecting flowers. But I don’t want to get stuck with them. Gathering bouquets is not what I had in mind for today.

I lift my thighs higher and my legs cramp. Then my head starts to warble too. Not this again! I want to pound my fists into the nearest tree until my knuckles are bloody. How much longer will I have to suffer the daily hassle of these aches and pains? Dr. Paradia said my symptoms are a normal part of the recovery process. She promised they would all eventually go away. But it’s been two months. How long is this rehabilitation going to take?

Raising my walking stick over my head, I almost throw it. But, remembering the girls behind me, I put it back down and take a few breaths to steady myself. There's a clearing up ahead and to the right of me. I hobble towards it like an old man and hope there's a place to sit down.

Off the main trail.

Up a steep path.

I grimace with every step and clench my jaw. I reach the edge of the clearing just as a major spasm attacks my left leg. A downed tree is close by. Can I make it?

Heliz's blonde curls bounce back down the trail. Sunlight shines on the ruby-red streaks in his yellow hair. One flash is so bright I see spots. He's fast to climb up the path to the clearing and rush over to me. It annoys me that he's only slightly winded.

"Are you okay?" he asks. "My pardon please, I didn't mean to leave you behind." He wipes his brow.

"I'm fine."

He pinches his lips together and judges me with his amethyst-colored eyes. Turning at the waist, he cups his hands around his mouth and shouts: "Guys! Come back! We need to take Sammy home!"

"Don't do that! Just help me get over there." I point to the log.

Heliz wraps an arm around my waist, holding me like I could shatter. I stifle grunts as he assists me across the small area, and cringe as he provides support while I sit down.

Our friends arrive at the clearing and crowd around like thick understory. Surrounded by this cluster of healthy Zantus, makes me want to cut them all down. Their copper skin and chiseled limbs serve as a cold reminder of how skinny and washed out I am. I want to order them to stop pitying me and demand some privacy. But I need to play it cool. I'll never be seen as a man by my peers if I start throwing tantrums.

"Please, go on. I'll be fine." I grin as the pain breaks me into pieces. Agony is probably scribbled all over my face. They have to know I'm telling lies.

If only they had known me before I spent six months in a bed during The Deep Sleep. If they'd seen me as I was in Earth World, stocky and solid, built more like them, they wouldn't treat me like an invalid now. They'd know what I'd once been capable of. Show confidence I'll be that strong again. A small sigh escapes out my nose.

"My brother will be fine," Heliz suddenly announces. He must have glimpsed my humiliation. "Let's go."

They all listen to Heliz because everyone always listens to Heliz. Even the girls who don't usually

allow themselves to be led by boys. It's the culture here. Women are in charge in Zantumay Territory.

Peeling away one by one, they stomp back to the trail. One of the flower girls asks me if my canteen is full before she leaves. I bob my head. My stomach tenses as she pats me on the shoulder. A kid whose name I can never remember gives me a bag of snacks I tell him "thanks" and slip it into my pocket. Heliz remains with me until the last hiker is gone.

"Why don't I stay?" he offers.

"Heliz! Stop it!" I roll my shoulders back and boost my chest out. More lies.

He scratches his head. "All right, here's my Chatty." He holds out the communication device. A rusty rectangular box the size of a candy bar and twice as thick. "Call on channel thirteen if you need us. The falls aren't much further. We should be back soon."

I take it and hover my fingers over the tiny black screen in the middle. I look over the worn knobs and dials, trying to remember how to operate such an alien piece of technology. I'm completely lost. Can't even recall how switch the thing on, but I'm too proud to ask for a refresher.

I give Heliz a false nod of confidence and he disappears into the trees. I slump forward, wincing as I massage the cramps out of my thighs. I'm not as light-headed as before.

I drop the pack from my shoulders and stretch my arms over my head. After a few wriggles and adjustments my wrecked body is as comfortable as it can be seated on a hunk of wood. I dig out my canteen and take a drink. The sana runs crisp and cool into my stomach. Sana is amazing stuff. Far superior to water. It won't just hydrate me. The nutrients will soothe my pains and steady my head again.

Moisture beads on my forehead and trickles down my nose. The heat surrounds me like a cocoon and I relax into it. This hot and sticky jungle is just like home. I start sliding to the ground so I can lean against the log and take a short nap, but a rustling in the bushes changes my mind. Using my walking stick to help me stand, I then hold it like a club. Although the weather here is familiar, the animals aren't. There's no telling what nasty new-world predators might be tracking me.

Scanning the area, I see no signs of trouble, but still discard the idea of a nap. My pulse still throbbing in my veins from the fear of an attack, I can't calm down enough to sit again. I shuffle over to the edge of the clearing instead.

The view of the valley below is almost worth the torture of getting here. I want to take this hike again when I'm stronger. I survey the canopy of trees, running my eyes over the lush hues of green all the way down to the sparkling river at the far end of our village. Somewhere under all those branches and leaves is my treehouse and my bed. I groan a little, thinking about the comfort of my snug, little

sling-bed.

Stabbing at the dirt with my walking stick, I imagine Heliz and my friends running all over these hills. They won't need of their beds until tonight. I hope they all get blisters.

My stomach growls. I gimp back to the log, with less cramping this time. Sana works fast. I remove the bag from my pocket and chomp down on savory bits of baked grain, daydreaming about what might be for dinner.

Muluc is a good cook and he's been patient with my palate as it gets used to Zantu foods. He makes things easier by introducing new tastes one at a time, often preparing a special meal, just for me, that isn't as spicy or as complex in flavor as what he serves the rest of the family. I'm thankful for all his efforts. If I've any chance of filling out again, I'm going to need lots of calories to do it.

So far, there is one thing he makes that I can't stand: Nabaxi Root Soup. It's a plain dish, made just from a root vegetable called nabaxi and sana. But it smells like peppery gun oil and tastes like mud. After trying it a few times, I've given up. When Muluc serves it, I usually say I'm tired and go to bed.

In Earth World, I had lots of practice going to bed on a demanding stomach. It doesn't bother me too much to skip a single meal, but turning in early also means I miss being with the family after dinner and that's my favorite part of the day.

In the evenings, everyone collects on the three porches of our treehouse. We drink a minty cold tea as stories of the day are recounted. I never have anything to add, but I like to listen to them talk and join in with their laughter. I appreciate being counted in their number. Even if they don't consider me a man. Yet.

My new family are good people. Honest. Generous. They take care of each other, and they all seem to like me. But having a woman at the head of the household is an adjustment I'm having trouble with. My new mother, Ixchel, runs this place with a strong arm. No one questions her authority, or they quickly regret it. I've only seen her challenged twice, and I'll never forget either experience.

And having the woman in command is not all I'm struggling with. Ixchel has four husbands. Muluc, Juaral, Iggiz, and Gerdar. I follow the example of my seventeen brothers and sisters, addressing them all as 'Papi' and their name. Papi Muluc, Papi Iggiz, and so on. The men are kind and gentle to me, but sometimes that makes them look weak. In my old world, men like these would have died first in battle.

Ixchel's first words to me went like this: "Hello Sammy. I'm Ixchel. You can call me Mami or Ixchel if you like. Work hard, obey your papis and me and we'll get along just fine."

And she and I do get along "just fine." I don't see her much. She works six days a week as the

supervisor over a factory that produces parts for the ComTrans trains. Papi Juaral and Papi Iggiz are employed in another factory that processes virium, the energy source for all the territories in Enova. Ixchel once told me it was important that her husbands are not also her employees. I didn't ask her to explain.

Papi Muluc and Papi Gerdar stay at home and knock about the house all day, washing, cooking, wiping sticky faces. Ixchel doesn't seem to appreciate how hard they work. She often talks to them like they're lazy and not very bright. She also demands they take care of her first, before themselves or the kids. She can be so selfish and awful to her husbands, but then smothers them with gifts and affection, too. They seem to genuinely care about her, but I still don't like watching them interact. I mostly avoid Ixchel whenever I can.

I can't imagine myself married to a Zantu. Having my wife order me around and treat me like an idiot. And, a worse thought, sharing her with other men. But I hide my opinion about these things. There doesn't seem to be another option.

"So, you're the fresh meat, eh?" A voice scratches my ears.

Two beady eyes stare at me from inside a pile of clothes. A smile below the beads reveals a set of teeth with dark spaces where some are missing. I scramble to my feet and raise my walking stick.

"Hey! Hey, man!" He holds up his palm in surrender. "Peace, brother. I ain't gonna hurt you."

I lower my stick, but keep a tight grip on it.

He's buried in heaps of material. Isn't he sweltering under all those clothes? I recognize all of his worn clothing as traditional Zantu dress except for his hat. The stranger wears a navy blue cap, fitted closely to his head with a curved bill jutting out. The Zantumay people don't wear head coverings of any kind. I don't think their bushy, yellow hair wouldn't fit under a hat. The man's hat is so old, it's difficult to tell, but it might be an American baseball cap. How could that be?

He steps in, bringing his weathered face very close. His scent is stale and rotten, like a hundred animals burrowed and died in his mountain of tattered clothes. I stretch my neck back to get away from the stink.

"New in town?" he cackles.

"What? I—I don't—"

"Don't what? Speak in complete sentences? You're still in the don't-know-which-way-is-up stage, aren't ya?"

The man twirls a circle.

"Tell me, Mr. Newcomer, where you from? Jamaica? America? England maybe? Or just. Plain.

Old. Africa?”

“Africa. The Congo, sir.” I flinch. Why did I call him sir? “You know Earth World countries?” I ask.

“Oh, yes, yes. I am a cat in the know. Sammy, Sammy, Sammy. Samuel.” One black circle winks.

“Samuel?” I repeat the name I was forced to use at school.

“Ssssssamuel! Samuel Clemens! Samuel Adams! Samuel de Champlain! Sammy Davis Junior! Sam, Sam, Sammy, Samuel!” He swoops his arms like a bird about to take flight and then creeps to my ear and whispers, “I can dig it.”

A forced laugh heaves from his belly, and then he starts up his crazy movements again. I shift my weight, fiddling with the belt loop on my pants. I wish I had a knife. I definitely don’t trust this man and want nothing to do with him, but could he be one of the “Others” I’ve been told about?

Papi Muluc told me three other Earthers, as they call us, arrived in Enova World at the same time I did. They’re recovering in different territories, far away from here. I don’t think this man one of them, though. This guy has been living out in the jungle much longer than I’ve been here. But he couldn’t be Zantu either, they have tan skin, where he’s very dark like me.

The man moves to the middle of the clearing and waves his stick like he’s conducting an orchestra. Then yanking it to his mouth, he begins to sing into it,

“I know you want to leave me! But I refuse to let you go-oooo!”

I change my mind; I don’t want to know anything about this guy. Advancing one sore muscle at a time, I reach for my pack and slip it back onto my shoulders. He doesn’t seem to notice me moving. Too busy singing for the bushes.

“Oh, I heard it through the grapevine!”

Moving only my eyes, I search for a way to escape unnoticed. It’s no good. I’m sandwiched between the edge of the clearing and the singing freak. Trapped. Confused. My head begins to pound.

“What do you want from me?” I yell, holding my stick over my head like a weapon again.

“Not a thing, not a thing. Not this cat. Not old Cliff Johnson. He don’t want nothing from you, man!” He ambles over to me. I hold my breath.

“But what do *they* want from you? That’s the question blowing in the wind.” He lingers for a second, his wild eyes locked on mine.

I’m paralyzed by his intense gaze and powerful smell. I let out a breath of relief when he withdraws to twirl again, taking that awful stink with him. Mid-spin, he stops and talks to the clouds.

“But what do they want from me? *Oh I heard it through the grapevine! Not much longer would you be mine!*”

Cliff continues to ramble on to himself. Some of it singing. Some talking. Some shouting. I can't understand any of it. Watching him descend further into the madness feels like I'm wearing a shirt made of goat hair. I'm done. Time to get away from this loony. What if he chases me? Have my legs recovered enough to out run him? I tread carefully toward the path leading to the main trail, when Cliff's words become intelligible again. I freeze.

"I lost it all, I lost it all! Everything is gone! *Through the grapevine!* Even she was . . ." Cliff hangs his head. "Lost. I lost . . . she." He lets go a piercing siren-scream. He throws his walking stick down and boxes the air. Falling to the ground, he rolls up like a centipede. The rags shake as he sputters out throaty sobs.

I throw off worry about my weak legs and race away.

"Nice to meet you, Sam! Nice to meet you, man!" Cliff calls after me, "Don't forget to ask them
what they want!"