

April 1778

Valley Forge

Fall had been marked by the failure to win back Philadelphia, Washington's grand plans having led to disaster. Those demoralized months soon gave way to the misery of winter, and the frigid season passed in a blurry stretch of snow, ice, frostbite, sickness, and starvation. Local farmers had been unwilling to sell their harvest for worthless Continental money when the British could pay handsomely, and with reliable, legitimate coin. The farmers had chosen realism over idealism, and so Washington's army had faced famine. Haven, like many, had endured early winter in a tent, and after laborious work erected a small hut with the men of her company.

How many had died? Too many bodies had been carried away, their vacated pallets quickly replaced by another. The constant presence of death wore thin the infinitesimal hope that, somehow, White Fox was still alive. Each day it had grown smaller and smaller until it simply dwindled to nothing.

Many days had been spent packed inside the hut with Hawley and ten other men, White Fox's fur clutched about her shivering body. She'd used that time to weigh the fox claws in her hands, to caress them again and again, and covet them like gold when the gazes of others proved too prying.

Were it not for the talismans of White Fox's spirit, her body would have surely crumbled to ash. And when the winds of winter cut down the number of patrols or forages, she would curl beneath the pelt and fend off the past. Better to focus on the ache in her limbs, the bite on her toes, the rumbling of her belly, the phantom pain of two invisible fingers. The winter had done much to separate her body and mind even further than before—and she'd welcomed it.

But the ground was finally starting to give beneath her feet with the mud of spring. She

smelled foul, but it mattered not—everyone else smelled foul, too. When water was brought from the stream, she waited until the others had left the hut to quickly wash the grime away. The sight of her own naked body was unrecognizable. Where she'd once grown strong with the marching and the manual labor of army life, she was now as frail and thin as an old woman. She counted her ribs, pressed her fingertips against the hardness of her sternum between her small breasts. Her hair had long been hacked away to fight the lice infestation, and now seemed to be growing back in uneven clumps.

The hips she'd once worried were too feminine for a man had flattened, and her courses had been irregular. She should have been glad of her boyish frame, for two years into her ruse she finally looked the part. Her body may have survived the winter, but inside remained nothing of the person she had been.

Even if a feast was brought, she was sure she could eat and eat and never feel full again. The space between her bones would fill out in time, if death did not take her first, but she would never be full again in a world without him.

At times, the pain was still raw. It seared a hole through her chest and woke her with choking gasps in the middle of the night. But the cold had numbed her in more ways than one. Nothing mattered anymore except the routine of camp, and the knowledge that the British were still in Philadelphia. Yet sometimes it seemed like all the world existed only in snowy fields and smoky huts.

After the filth had been washed away, Haven slowly pulled the loose-fitting uniform over her bones and set out to find Otto.

She lingered outside the modest stone house doubling as Washington's headquarters, hoping to catch him before one of Baron von Steuben's blasted drills. She dug her worn heel into

the mud and idly sipped the whiskey flask Hawley had secreted her several days before. He'd often given her the refuge of spirits throughout the winter, and some nights, it had been the only thing to warm them.

Otto emerged, his cheeks no longer as round as they had once been. "I was just coming to find you."

"Morning," she said, touching her hat.

His eyes darted about, his hand tapping against his thigh.

She lowered her voice. "What is it?"

"General Wayne has asked for you, personally."

"Me?" She'd come to him for news from Philadelphia, not an inquiry from General Wayne. "What does he—"

Before she could inquire further, Otto nudged her toward the house.

General Wayne sat behind a table littered with curling maps, soiled letters, and half-drunk coffee mugs. To his left stood General Washington, his powdered reddish-gray hair brushing the ceiling. Adjusting his great coat of rich navy trimmed in gold, he offered a closed-mouth smile of recognition.

Haven's breath caught in her throat. Washington's cool gaze connected with hers and she quickly saluted.

"That was swift work, Private Beck," Wayne said, interlacing his fingers. "Corporal Bennett." He nodded toward Washington. "And this man needs no introduction." Wayne let out a laugh that made Haven start. Washington grinned.

"It's an honor, General," she said, bowing her head. He'd stayed with the regiments throughout the winter, and the men had respected him for that.

Washington inclined his head, then lowered his hulking frame into a chair. He crossed one long leg over the other. "You'll have heard of General Lafayette's man, Lieutenant-Colonel Tousard?"

"A bit, General." There'd been talk of General Lafayette's late winter trip to New York with three other Frenchmen, the purpose of which had only been rumor. But Lafayette had recently returned to camp, without Tousard.

"Colonel Tousard has recruited a band of Oneida to fight for us," Wayne said. "We've received word the party has made it to Pennsylvania and are at present at a nearby village."

Her heartbeat thundered in her ears and blotted out Wayne's words. She managed a nod. Oneida coming to Valley Forge? Would she truly see her old friends again?

Washington steepled his fingers. "General Wayne tells me you interacted closely with the Oneida people while in New York."

She nodded again.

"The Oneida also bring food and supplies for the army. It would be pertinent to send of our own to fetch them," Wayne said. "A show of good faith, if you will."

Haven raised her brows and stole a glance at Otto, who seemed just as surprised as she. Perhaps Elly and William were with them? How many miles had they traveled through the unrelenting winter to bring them relief?

Washington handed her the note from Tousard. "You'll leave today."

Haven looked between Washington and Wayne, then bowed her head once more. "Yes, of course. Thank you, sir." She tucked the correspondence away. "General." She saluted again.

"Private, see that Corporal Bennett gets one of the faster horses. And a bit of bread for the journey," Wayne commanded.

“Yessir,” Otto said.

They walked in coiled silence back to her hut, Otto's eyes flickering to her every now and then. She pushed aside the soiled blanket that served as the door and Otto followed her inside. The others had likely already gone to drill, leaving them alone in the pungent, cramped space.

“Elly?” Haven said.

He nodded slowly. “She must be, by God...do you think...”

“And William?”

“I don't know.” A grin pulled his worn features.

“I'm sure they've come. I'll bring her back safe.”

“The Lord has answered my prayers,” he said.

As happy as she was to reunite with old Oneida friends, their mere presence would be an aching reminder of White Fox's absence. Still, perhaps she would find comfort in hearing directly from them what had happened at Oriskany.

Otto's smile faded, seemingly sensing her trepidation. “I'll fetch you a pack of supplies for the journey. Meet at the stables?”

She nodded.

After he'd gone, she sank to her bunk, quietly collecting her thoughts. She tried to conjure their faces. Had they all made the journey south? It had been more than a year since she'd seen them; her memories like a long-ago dream. Another life.

How many lives had she lived in this war?

When the first semblance of dawn began to seep through the gray sky, she made for the Oneida camp. The modest homes fell away and were soon replaced with tall, spindly trees

boasting the first buds of the season. Wood smoke blended pleasantly with the sweet spring air, and she quickly turned her horse toward it.

They were camped in a clearing; several small tents interspersed with campfires. The horses were hobbled next to two covered carts filled with barrels and burlap sacks.

“Ho!” she called, waving.

Ukwehuwehnéha exclamations sounded through camp.

Han Yerry approached and took the reins of her horse. She slid off, barely keeping her excitement at bay.

“*Shékoli*, Mr. Doxtader.”

“*Shékoli*, Corporal Bennett,” he said, a smile cracking his wind-chapped face. She shook his hand and patted his back.

She turned, and there stood Tyonajanegen, Deacon Thomas, Shines Bright, Cornelius, Jacob, and Polly Cooper. Behind them, a camp of Oneida warriors.

“Corporal Bennett,” Tyonajanegen said, and without preamble, gathered her into an embrace. The hollowness within Haven seemed to recede for a moment, heart to heart with the woman who had raised White Fox.

She parted from Tyonajanegen and looked over her shoulder, Shines Bright smiled and turned, revealing a baby in a carrier on her back.

“Congratulations,” Haven said.

“She arrived this past November. Our *Yohnáwelote*.”

“Spring Of Water.” Haven reached out, then drew her hand back. “Was the journey not hard on you both?”

Shines Bright smirked. “I couldn't let my husband have all the adventures.”

Haven met her gold-brown stare, and was suddenly reminded of her own mother.

Polly stepped forward. "It's been too long since we saw you in Oriska, Corporal Bennett."

"We wouldn't have brought half the supplies were it not for Polly's insistence—and foresight," Tyonajanegen said, thrusting an arm around the woman.

"*Bonjour.*" A smartly uniformed Frenchman sauntered into view. "It seems these others need no introduction."

"Lieutenant-Colonel Tousard, I assume?" she said, hesitating whether to salute or offer a hand. "Corporal Bennett."

"Corporal." Tousard leaned his elbow on the hilt of his saber. "I had wondered if *Général* Washington would send someone."

What a sorry sight she must seem to a Frenchman, with his splendid navy coat, gold epaulets, and crimson cravat. His frothy wig and generous jowls made him look much older, and wiser, than perhaps he was.

"*Viens ici.* Come." Tousard said.

She hesitated, looking back at the familiar faces she did not wish to part.

"Let us have some wine, for you must be tired from your journey," Tousard said as they entered his tent. He motioned to a woman inside. Her capped-head was bent, a baby on her back, she pulled two glasses from a trunk and set them out on the desk.

"It was not a terribly long journey," Haven said. "Valley Forge is two days ride."

The woman spun around.

"Ben?" she breathed, a copper curl sliding from her cap.

"Elly," Haven said, grasping the back of a chair to keep herself from embracing her.

“You are...*connaissance*, erm, acquainted?” Tousard said, sinking into his chair.

“We spent some time together in New York, Colonel,” Elly said.

“More reason to celebrate,” Tousard smiled and motioned for Elly to fill the glasses. She turned, bringing Haven face to face with little William. Blonde and wide-mouthed, just like his father.

“He's grown,” she said.

Elly gave a little laugh and looked over her shoulder.

Tousard frowned at the two glasses, then promptly reached into the trunk and retrieved a third. Elly gave a shy smile and filled the last.

“Now,” Tousard said, expectantly eyeing them until they'd each grasped the delicate stems. “To friends, old and new.”

“To friends, old and new,” Haven repeated, gaze flicking outside. After they'd had their fill, Tousard sat back.

“Madame Beck insisted on helping me on the journey south,” Tousard said, before taking another drink. “I said, 'Madame, surely someone should be helping *you* with a new child?’” He smiled appreciatively at Elly. “Dear Elly,” his accent broke her name in two, lilting at the end, “told me of her husband with *Général* Washington's army. Romantic that I am, I could not refuse her. She has been under my protection on this journey, as I have been in hers.”

Elly blushed and bobbed her head. Slowly, she looked back up at Haven. “Is...my husband...?”

“At Valley Forge and eager to see you.”

Elly bit her lip again.

“*Mon cher*, will you excuse us a moment?” Tousard said. “I promise I will only keep your

friend a little while longer, and then you may reacquaint yourselves.”

“Of course, Colonel.” Elly curtsied. “Corporal.” She shot Haven a knowing look before departing.

“A mere Corporal, sent by *le Général* himself?”

“I have had a unique relationship with the Oneida people.”

Tousard nodded slowly. “These past months I worked with my own *Général* Lafayette to encourage the Oneidas to join the Continentals. *Général* Washington himself wishes to have these warriors fight with him and for him.”

“They are strong allies.”

Tousard tilted his head. “We tried to build them a fort at...how do you say...Kan-on-wal-o-hale, but my *Général* was called back to Valley Forge. He left me to recruit the rest of the warriors.” He frowned. “There was not enough time, you see, to build the fortifications as they would have liked. We did not secure as many warriors...a fact that even their people seemed regretful.”

“I am sorry to hear that, Colonel.” She paused, considering. “But the men you have are sound. It has been some time since I have fought and scouted with them, but I would trust them with my life.” White Fox’s ghost whispered across her skin.

“We are expecting a group of hunters back soon. Will you join us for supper? We shall have a hearty meal before we set out tomorrow morning.”

A twinge of hunger growled in her stomach. She reflexively placed a hand there. “I wouldn't want to impose—”

“*Absurdité*. You will come.” Tousard waved his hand, then turned his attention to the papers on his desk. “*Merci*, Corporal.” Mischief lit his eyes. “Go be with *tes amis*.”

“Thank you, Colonel,” she said, saluting.

Outside, Tyonajanegen, Polly, Shines Bright, and Elly warmed themselves by the fire.

“*Shékoli.*” Haven sat with them.

“What do you think of our Frenchman?” Tyonajanegen said, stitching a moccasin.

“He's asked me to stay for supper.”

They nodded in agreement, a companionable silence soon settling over them. Many months had passed, and re-learning their rhythms would take time. She sighed. “Have you all fared well on the journey south?”

“The Great Spirit has been kind during our travels,” Shines Bright said, glancing to Tyonajanegen.

“White corn for your soldiers,” Polly said, gesturing to the supply carts.

“We are in your debt,” Haven said. “General Washington will be very pleased with the men Tousard has gathered.”

“The Frenchman did not need to convince them,” Tyonajanegen said.

Soon, the tension of lost months seemed to ease as they exchanged stories and news from the north. For the time being, Haven skirted mention of Oriskany, and noted the women did, too. No doubt that wound was still fresh, even now.

Haven sat with the women in silence, both Elly and Tyonajanegen trading knowing looks. Had she missed something? She frowned, then turned her attention to Elly.

“It's so good to see you again, and William.”

“And you, Ben,” she said with a slow, hesitant smile.

“What?” Haven said.

“A great many things have happened since you've been away,” Tyonajanegen said.

Elly lowered her voice. “Well, it seems silly now really, but I—”

“What?”

“I know...about *you*.”

She gulped and looked to the others, who seemed unperturbed.

“You need not worry.” Elly smiled again. “You and I have been close, it would be strange if *you* thought *I* thought our closeness inappropriate.”

Haven’s fear momentarily receded as she stifled a laugh. “I didn’t think that.”

“Oh,” Elly said, adjusting her her cap.

A call from the edge of camp startled her. A group of hunters had returned. Tyonajanegen stood and spoke to Shines Bright and Polly in Ukwehuwehnéha, then turned back to Haven.

“Excuse us, Corporal, we must fetch the kills.”

There was something familiar about one of the hunters, while the other seemed an older mirror of the first.

Halfway toward them, she froze.

White Fox stood just feet from her.

He stared at her, lips parting.

“*Shékoli*, old friend,” Chief Skenandoah said.

She could not form words, and Skenandoah simply patted her shoulder and continued on. She gave a nod of respect as he parted, then turned back to find White Fox pacing toward the trees.

Hesitantly, she followed.

They were alone now, surrounded by burgeoning foliage, sweet blossoming air, and the titter of the forest. The quiet conversations of camp died away, leaving only the sound of her own

breath, and his.

Her throat closed and her mouth dried. She licked her lips and swallowed several times, then reached out to steady herself on a sapling.

She looked up slowly, hands trembling at her sides.

She cleared her throat and was surprised when it was Ukwehuwehnéha that finally forced its way through. “*Kasl̥hti-yó?* Do I dream?” She tentatively brought her hands to his shoulders, his neck, his face.

“This is not a dream, Tayolh̥’hati,” he said, hoarse.

“How—” she choked on the words again.

He touched his forehead to hers and brought his hands up to cradle her face. “I’m here. I’m here.” He switched to Ukwehuwehnéha and whispered, his mouth close.

“But you—I thought you were *dead*.” Tears pooled in her lashes, and she blinked to let them go. He gently wiped a thumb over her cheek, his expression twisted with a sort of terror.

“No...”

“But Oriskany—the letter—”

He pulled back, brows knit. “Letter?”

“Elly sent it.” Her breath caught again.

“She must have...you weren’t supposed to—” he muttered a curse in Ukwehuwehnéha.

And then it was all too real—too much, too sudden when she had grown accustomed to the world without him.

She stepped back and passed a hand over her face. “We should—” she pointed back to camp.

He gave a distracted nod. She walked in front of him then, his presence burning into her

back. She was having trouble breathing and clasped a hand to her chest. Her mind had not yet caught up with her body. It had been nearly a year and a half since she'd seen White Fox, and she'd spent many of those months thinking him dead.

But he wasn't. All she'd wanted was now mere feet from her, but she was frozen. Were they still as they had once been to each other?

At camp, she started for her horse and Elly caught her arm. "I must go—" Haven gestured to Tousard's tent. "Please give Colonel Tousard my apologies. I shall return tomorrow morning."

White Fox's gaze followed her and she quickly looked away.

She paced her room for a time, hugging her arms close around her body. Twice she'd gathered her things to ride out again, each time promptly deciding against it.

She lay in bed, wide-awake and keenly focused on the wind rattling the frame of the cracked window. A nearby branch tapped again and again on the glass. She tossed about on the thin corn husk mattress before giving up altogether. She sat up and drained her flask.

She couldn't sit still knowing he was so near, nor could she go to him. Not yet. She had gone so long without him; without his touch. She'd learned to exist without him; how could he fit into her life now? And if they could never truly be how they'd once been, what then?

She laid back down and sighed. Again, the branch tapped against the window. She sprang up, ready to snap the end off.

The ghost in the window made her start. She put a hand to her chest, regained her breath, then opened it.

White Fox sat in the tree, grinning. "Good evening, Corporal."

She pulled her undershirt tighter around herself.

The wind whipped his hair over his face. It was an even length now, hanging to his shoulders. “May I—”

Haven peered out the window, then placed her finger to her lips and motioned him in. Hesitantly, she grabbed his arm and helped him through the window. She quickly released him, his touch too real, and busied herself with closing the window.

She took a few steps back.

They stared at each other for a moment, a grin—so uniquely and utterly his in nature—flickered upon his lips.

He turned to warm his hands over the glowing embers of the fire.

“The innkeeper will throw you out if he sees you,” she said, finally, pressing her nails into her palms.

He looked over his shoulder, his eyes flashing with laughter.

She trembled.

He strode to the door. The key still sat in the lock, and he turned it with a click before placing it beside the water basin. He placed his palms on the table, muscled back hunching with a deep breath.

Words swelled and receded in waves.

He turned and came to her. “Haven.”

She took a few steps back, the backs of her knees hitting the bed.

“Please—” she held out a hand, then turned her face from the pain written on his.

“I’m sorry, this is...you—” He frowned, then took a hesitant step forward. The flickering ember light glowed gold on his brown skin.

“White Fox, please.” She shook her head, tears coming too fast as she sank to the bed.

The shadows carved deep into his angular features and high cheek bones. He was as handsome as the day they’d met—more so, somehow. He glanced down, and she realized she’d held up her maimed hand. She quickly drew it away, but he caught it between his hands before she could. He knelt before her and traced the scars, the puckered, empty places where the pinky and ring fingers had been.

He brought her hand to his lips, his eyes glistening. “*Nhat*—” He stopped short. He’d told her once that mere English could not always convey the things that could be communicated with far more feeling in his native tongue. He started again. “I am so sorry I wasn’t there.”

“It is nothing compared to what others have endured.” She detached her hand from his and cradled it in her lap. He continued to kneel before her and tentatively placed his hands on her knees.

“Haven, look at me.” His shoulders trembled, ever so slightly.

Her chest seemed to crumble with an aching burn, and after some time, she met his gaze.

His fingertips pressed into her knees. “I am here, *Tayolh*’hati. I am real. I am with you.”

She nodded, but he repeated it again. This time her guard broke, a sob slipping through. He quickly stood and gathered her against him.

She buried her face against the worn fabric of his hunting shirt. She breathed in his familiar scent of sweat and wood smoke, sending ripples of relaxation over her body.

He ran his hands through her short hair until they came to rest at her jaw. Her hands found his neck and she pulled him to her. She met his lips half way. Such an old sensation; something she hadn’t expected to feel ever again. Something she had locked away in a small box.