



The steely gray dawn was so quiet, one would think it a friendly welcome to the day. But Aurinda knew better. As her eyes adjusted to the dim light and she looked out the window, she shivered at the realization the snow continued, as it had for so many days. Would this snowfall ever cease?

She returned to bed, rolled onto her side under the quilts, and cupped her hand across her growing belly. It was warm life amidst the incessant cold. As she studied her husband's chiseled face, serene in silent sleep, she recalled her first perusal of his features that day so long ago. A terrifying day for Zadok when his horse accident left him without sight for weeks. Aurinda's freedom at that time to inspect his strong features came at the expense of his unseeing eyes as hers roamed across his features. Even then, Aurinda loved the face of the man who now lay beside her.

Zadok stirred awake. The couple had only slept a few hours at most since Levi was called away. She drew herself closer to her husband, fearing if she didn't keep him close, he, too, might be whisked away into the cold.

Levi's unit had been summoned to join General Washington.

And in this weather. No wonder Mercy was upset, not to mention quite pregnant and delicate in emotions.

Aurinda threw off the covers and arose until a wave of nausea rolled through her belly. She barely made it to the chamber pot tucked beneath their bed before she lost everything in her stomach. Still shaking from her retching, Aurinda struggled toward the chest of drawers where the pitcher and bowl sat. Grabbing the ice pick to break through the frozen layer on top of the pitcher, she poured the frigid water into the bowl, then scooped up a handful to swallow. She was still leaning on the dresser, breathing with difficulty, when she felt Zadok's hand on her shoulder.

He wrapped his arms around her and guided her toward their bed. As she sat on the edge of their feather mattress, Zadok helped her back under the covers and tucked the blanket around her. "Your face is as white as the snow outdoors." He stroked her cheek.

"That's the first time I've been sick." She tried to smile but burst into tears. "Why did Levi have to leave?"

"Washington wants all the troops in Morristown for the winter."

"But it's so far. How will Mercy stand it?"

Zadok stared out the window for a moment. "I suppose the way all consorts do when their husbands have gone to war. Mercy's been fortunate to have him close this long." He turned his gaze back to her. "Are you better now? Can I bring you anything?"

"Nay. Just hold me." He lay down behind her and encircled her with his arms. His warmth soothed her fears. "I'm so grateful you're not in the Army, Zadok."

He grew silent. A sudden unease ate away at Aurinda's thoughts. Would he consider such an action now that they were married and a child was on the way?

"Zadok?" Her attempts at keeping calm seemed inept when even she could hear the distress in her voice.

He squeezed her gently against himself. "A year ago, I would have been anxious to sign on. But now, so much has changed. I've changed because of you. I've no wish to go off a soldierin'. I've no wish to leave you. Yet, I fear, before this war is over, we'll all be a part of this endeavor in ways we never wanted."

"What do you mean?" She longed for him to reassure her that the war would never touch their lives again. Never bring destruction to their doorstep ever again. Yet it already had. How could he give her false hope even she could not believe?

"'Tis nothing, my sweet. Just my wandering thoughts not worth a Continental." He nuzzled the back of her neck. "Besides, I want to think of other, more pleasant things."

As he stroked her long hair, she clung to his arms that had wrapped around her tightly. But her grip on his strong limbs was less of passion and more of panic. Could she face any more moments of terror like she'd endured in these last months? It was easier to be brave with less at risk. Yet now, the stakes were so much higher.

Now she carried new life within. And the thought of endangering the fruit of Zadok's love left her with a sickening sense of foreboding.

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"MAY I make you some ginger tea, Aurinda?" Her mother-in-law's eyes showed sympathy as Aurinda finally emerged from their bedroom. "It might settle your digestion."

Had the whole household heard her retching? Aurinda's face burned. "That ... that would be welcome, Mother Wooding."

She wasn't used to living in such close quarters with so many. Even when she lived with her father, he was usually too drunk to pay attention to such things. Aurinda wondered how many other sounds traveled through their wooden walls to listening ears.

Aurinda swallowed back her embarrassment as Mother Wooding placed the brewed tea in front of her. "Thank you." She

shivered as she clung to the warm china cup, wishing she could will the heat to spread throughout her body.

Mother Wooding placed another log on the hearth, and Aurinda moved to a chair just next to the fire. Even here, the chill enveloped her.

Mercy emerged from the back room, wrapped in two blankets. Her soft, leather moccasins padded quietly on the wooden slats, and she sought the other chair closest to the fire. Her mother handed her a steaming cup of ginger tea as well.

“This incessant cold.” Mercy took a long sip.

*And without your husband to keep you warm abed.* Aurinda sighed.

Mother Wooding sat at the table but faced her daughter and daughter-in-law. She inhaled a deep breath. “’Tis temptin’ to sit by the fire all day, I know. A warm chair beckons me to sit by the hearth as well. Yet we must think of others who could be sufferin’ in this weather. We must set to preparin’ for this cold. In all my years on earth, I ne’er recall such a freezin’ start to the season. Something about it seems especially troublesome ...” Her voice trailed off.

Aurinda shivered, but not from the temperature.

“What ... what would you have us do, Mother Wooding?” Aurinda attempted to swallow over a dry tongue.

“We need to make haste and be ready.” Mother Wooding shifted her gaze from the fire to Aurinda. “Set your weaving loom up, my dear. Keep it close to the hearth and weave away. The more blankets, the better.”

She turned her attention to her daughter. “Mercy, my sweet girl, we must card the wool from the sheep shearing. I shall help you. Let us knit from dawn till dusk and pray ’tis enough.” Both young women stared at Mother Wooding with widened eyes and nodded.

“Very well, then. I shall make us a hearty meal so we can get started.”

ZADOK SET to work chopping wood—the more, the better, he reasoned. What would they do if they ran out? He wouldn't allow his thoughts to entertain such a possibility. Besides, the abundant forests offered a seemingly endless supply. The challenge was keeping ahead of the need for seasoned cordwood since damp kindling was worthless. The other challenge was chopping down trees without freezing to death. His old neighbor had done so, leaving his frail wife without a husband. Unless her son arrived from Hartford, Zadok would have had to divide their resources and his time between the two households.

Had there ever been such a winter? Not even the natives' lore recalled any.

These days, Zadok walked so slowly that it was a wonder the blood in his veins did not turn to red crystals. It wasn't just the chilled air that slowed the universe down. The ever-increasing snow depths caused his feet to plod like heavy logs through the drifts. The very breath he exhaled floated like a thick fog, waiting for a place to land.

The incessant freeze was brutal. Heartless and cruel.

In all his twenty-three years, Zadok had never seen such a winter. It seemed one storm would pause in its savage assault only to be followed by threatening gray clouds that portended yet another squall. Then the icy particles of snow would begin their ruthless attack, as if expert archers were flinging arrows of ice, freezing everyone and everything in their path. The frigid wind sent chills of fear, along with relentless shivers that penetrated deep into Zadok's bones. Would he ever feel warm again?

His skin had long since turned raw. His face appeared sunburned, the skin on his hands open, cracked and bleeding. No amount of bear grease could soothe the pain nor heal the sores. Aurinda wrapped them each night with soft linen to keep the emollient from coming off. The thawing in his hands was the

most painful as he held them closer to the fire to bring the circulation back to his numb fingers. He clenched his teeth with the healing process, swallowing back curses from the agony.

The savagery of the season was matched only by the barbarity of battle.

When his father had come home from war the previous summer, he'd shared memories of combat with Zadok. The son had listened in both fascination and horror. How could humans be so heartless against their own kind? It seemed God's creation reflected that cruelty with the endless winter that tore at flesh and eroded the strength of the boldest of hearts. Fortitude, Zadok learned, could be worn down little by little, like the rocks along the shore battered by waves.

*Dear God, help us survive this.*