

Together



Shield B.

His palm is pressed firmly against mine, his fingers holding our hands together. Callouses draw my attention, stiff from work. Our bodies are exhausted from effort, and the heat is disseminating into the ground and air around us. Soaked in sweat, I vacillate into shivering. The dog next to me is shifting its weight to find a more comfortable position. My mind is separate from my body, and much as I know I need to bring both things together, I can't seem to unify my thoughts and actions. A mental inventory of my physical state requires more focus than I have. As we're in no position to talk, I won't have to extend any false assurance. I let the effort slide.

His hand squeezes mine and he moves our hands to rest on his chest. It is a purposeful attempt to make me focus on my breathing. Closing my eyes, I can feel the rise and fall his chest makes as he slowly inhales and exhales. We are responsible for the men dying below us on this mountain. Only one remains audibly conscious, extolling his pain and sending my heart jarring across the airwaves. An effort to focus on the chirping birds or crawling insects is a flawed attempt at distraction. I send wishes that the wind might blow to create noise, knowing a possibility exists that it would blow the sounds of death closer.

Carefully, he unfolds our hands, rubbing my palm between his fingers and thumb. My mind can't zero in. Time is stretching, moving too slowly. I feel the dog's head resting on top of my hip. I know if I touch the dog, it will cause his tail to wag, so I refrain. My tears are hidden behind sunglasses. They run across my face, leaving trails in the grime, but I can't wipe them away. My throat is dry and constricted so tightly that my ears ache. It will be a few more minutes before we can move, and I hope the tears subside.

His fingers move from my hand to my wrist, pressing into the artery to feel my pulse. The air is acrid; the smells of dust and vegetation are overpowered. Neither hungry nor nauseated, both are blessings. I imagine the sun moving quickly towards the horizon so that we may benefit from greater shade. I memorize the rock outcropping leaning over me. I touch the dog, slowly tracing the bones of its jaw, feeling the curve of its throat as it drops towards its chest.

It occurs to me that if I squeeze my hand tightly against his, I will be assuring him that I am fine. I want him to continue holding my hand so that I'm anchored; I want the physical reassurance that I am not alone. When we move again, the hand in mine will be replaced by a rifle, the tool of my trade. I withhold the communication that will cause him to withdraw his hand. I want to pretend for a little while longer.

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BY SHIELD B.

Clayton D. v.
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