

The Promise

a Short Story by Jessa Forest

When I woke it was not from sleep but a dreamless poison. The fog was thick when we stopped and it must have crept in and thickened when we were too weak to stand or notice, too weak to get away; smothering us like an insidious, sentient tide, all cold hunger and keen thirst.

Barrow, lying next to me, did not rise and never would again. Her younger brother, Potter, whimpered softly in the cold crook of her arm.

“Pyre,” Coffin’s choked, coughing voice floated above me like sunshine above a storm. “Can you walk, Pyre?”

There was a frightful urgency in his voice and I stretched my spine and flexed my knees experimentally. Pain bloomed from the joints outward, like the fog had decided it liked me better than the tunnels and had come inside when I breathed.

Which it did.

That is how fog works, after all.

If it didn’t get your lungs first it got your legs. It gets your arms too but you don’t use your arms as much when you’re traveling the tunnels.

The ones who came before us, the very first, had to dig as they went. The fog rolled their bones back to us, splintered and dissolving like pages of the old books Gallows insisted on bringing with us.

Gallows died two nights ago. Her books died with her.

Gallows knew a lot about dead things. And she was the only person I knew who came back from the tunnels alive; she was special. She was the one who told us what the fog did but despite all her knowledge she couldn't tell us why.

When Gallows picked up the bones of the very next and breathed in the fog she coughed her lungs up in big red clots and painted nearly an arm's length of the tunnel wall from floor to ceiling with her blood. When the fog rolled her back to us she said she wanted to try again.

She said she was proud.

But proud of what? Proud to die only a few feet from the door? Not much of an adventure. Not much help to the very next to come after.

In the tunnels there is no true night.

We know night from the memories of the very first and those who came before them. They didn't know night wouldn't work in the tunnels. They didn't think they'd need the tunnels long enough to worry about night not working.

I rolled onto my side and pushed myself up onto my screaming knees. My wrists hurt too but I could stretch and pull them while I walked. They would feel better soon. The knees though...those were a problem. I lifted one foot and crouched in a sort of lunge. I tried to put weight on my front foot and push myself up.

I screamed and fell on my side. I felt Coffin's hands on my shoulders, pulling at me again.

"You can't lie down, Pyre. You gotta try again!"

Next to me, Potter began to weep.

"No, Coffin," I grit my teeth through the pain. "It's no use. I'm done. You take Potter and go. You get to the outside."

“Not without you.”

“All three of us die,” I shook my head, “you can’t carry Potter and me. You two go.”

I felt Potter’s spidery arms around my waist, felt his warm breath under my chin, his tears wetting my neck.

“Hey!” I said. “Don’t you cry! Moisture and the fog’ll blind you.”

I wiped at his face. His eyes felt swollen. He’d been crying all night.

“Then it’s settled, we all die here, together,” Coffin said.

I felt him sit down behind me, stretch his legs out on either side of mine and cradle me the same way Barrow used to hold Potter. He was the tallest of us and as he folded his body around mine I felt like I was being eaten but not in a bad way.

If I had a choice I would lie in Coffin’s arms forever. But I didn’t. And I couldn’t let them stay.

I tried pushing Coffin away but my elbow and spine were locked in the fog and soft, misty teeth tore another scream from my throat.

“Hey, hey,” Coffin’s lips were in my hair. “Stop thrashing.”

“You gotta get up,” I said, fighting my own tears. “You gotta be the chance the rest of us don’t have.”

“Not leaving you, Pyre,” he said.

“How many of us were there? 10? 15? How many’s left? We can’t be like the very first, we promised.”

“Who’d we promise, Pyre?”

“Everybody!”

“Yeah,” Coffin sighed. “And they don’t care anymore.”

Potter stretched himself out against my thigh and began to tremble. The shakes started soft but soon his whole body was vibrating. I bent forward, trying to keep his head from hitting the tunnel floor but Coffin wrapped his arms around me again and pulled me away.

“What?” I cried. “Gotta help!”

“Not gonna do any good,” Coffin said.

“It’ll do me good,” I hissed but I couldn’t pull away.

“I should leave you,” Coffin said. “But you’re so stupid you’d find a way to screw up your own death.”

“I would not,” I said, tears choking my throat. I could see more clearly, that meant the fog was pulling away, rolling back into the deeper parts of the tunnels. But it was already too late; the reprieve wouldn’t save Potter. His wrecked little body was curled in on itself like a dead flower.

Gallows kept dead flowers pressed inside the pages of her books.

Potter was as dead as she was now.

“You feel like trying to walk again?” Coffin asked when the silence got too heavy.

Sometimes the silence was worse than the fog.

“I can try,” I whispered. But I didn’t move.

I didn’t want to look at Potter’s body anymore. Or Barrow’s. Or Mori’s. The little husk of Potter’s body twisted back towards the long trail of bodies we’d left behind. Eventually the fog would get thick again it would roll them all back to where we’d started.

It would be like they’d never left.

“How long do you think the very next will wait?” I asked.

“Don’t know,” Coffin chuckle-coughed. His chest felt hollow, like his heart was a giant bead in a rattle. But he wasn’t shaking yet, he just sounded like he was. “Maybe another day-week thing. What did they call it?”

“A month?” I asked. “I don’t remember. I never liked reading much.”

“Yeah,” Coffin said. “Because you’re stupid.”

“Says one who can’t remember words,” I laughed. My ribs cracked.

“Quiet down,” he said.

I wanted to hit him. I tried to hit him. A heavy ripping sound came from right inside my shoulder and then my arm hung limp at my side.

Coffin hugged me tighter.

“It doesn’t hurt anymore,” I said, amazed.

“It won’t,” Coffin said, pressing his lips to my neck, “I promise.”

“Don’t,” I said, “you’re going to break it.”

Coffin coughed. I smelled his blood and felt the thick, warm frothiness of it drip down my cheek. Moisture mixing with the fog will blind you. But I didn’t mind it if blindness came from him.

“Yeah,” he sniffed. I felt him pull away slightly but one arm was still tight around my waist. I felt his hand crawl up my broken shoulder, felt his brittle fingers at my neck.

“But you won’t know I did.”

And he was right.