

Katalina L.

### Stay Strong

A pale woman with honey-blonde hair. A man in all black, a mask over his face. Her last words: "Run! Don't let them catch you!" The gunshot, the blood, and finally, the tears, flowing freely. These were my last memories as I disappeared, running into the woods.

I passed rows of trees, their leaves falling onto the dense soil on top of countless others. I passed the scampering squirrels as they scurried up the tree, startled by my heaving sobs and pounding heart. The branches scratched my face and hands; the dirt stained my bare feet. My thin nightgown was being ripped to shreds as the cold wind froze my aching limbs. And still, I kept running.

I stopped under a large oak tree, catching my breath as memories flooded my mind, leading me into another heart-wrenching breakdown. My world was falling apart; my mother was dead, my father gone, and the woods at night were a dangerous place. Everywhere I looked, I saw danger. The shadows concealed dark, threatening animals that could attack at any time. Inside the bushes lurked creatures of unimaginable brutality. The wind, whistling in my ears, concealed the gunshot that might soon strike me down.

That night was spent cowering under a tree, ready to sprint away at any moment. Though I had been trained for many life-threatening situations, I had never expected my training to be useful. But now it would be.

The next morning, I mustered up my courage and ventured out into the mysterious woods. The morning had brought layer upon layer of fog, blanketing the world in a dull grey tint. Fortunately, due to my training, I knew how to make a well-concealed fire. As the fire crackled, I pondered over the danger I was facing. If I returned home to find my father, they could be waiting. But if I stayed, the woods would become my grave.

I decided to return to my home. If there were challenges that awaited me, so be it. I began the long walk back. After a while, I found myself irrevocably lost. My usually keen sense of direction had failed me. Everywhere I turned, the trees looked the same. The treacherous ground, covered with a thin layer of dew, reached out to me, but I fought it. Finally, the hill! I crept to the top and peered over. I ducked back down, horrified.

A man was hunched over on the ground. His veins were purple, his skin pale white. His eyes were blood red and his lips were blue. It was a gruesome sight. He was glowing, a bright yellow color that hurt my eyes. But what was worse was that I knew him.

"Dad?" I spoke softly, almost whispering. His head turned in my direction, but stopped, as if an invisible force was making him keep working. Beneath him were bodies. There must have been ten of them, and as I watched, he put something strange in one's arm. The body began to twitch, then gurgle, and finally, started glowing. The woman sat up, another mindless zombie. Then, turning around, my father began to walk away. I followed, unsure of what lay ahead.

My father slinked into his office, where a man sat at his desk, grinning wickedly.

"So," he leered. "You finally arrived. We have been waiting for you." Knowing he meant me, I got up, ready for a fight. Immediately, my father tackled me to the ground, holding my arms behind my back as he held up a knife. I looked up at his eyes as his hands trembled. The controller was becoming impatient, shouting "Just kill her already!" But I could see my father inside of that zombie, fighting for control. He wouldn't kill me. He couldn't. Then, with a surge of courage, my father turned towards the controller, his parental instincts overpowering the controller's maniacal impulses. He reached out a shaking hand, rage enveloping him, making him lose all his senses as he realized how close he had come to murdering his daughter. With an

inhuman roar, he tackled the controller, bringing the knife that was supposed to murder me down on him. As soon as the knife touched the controller's skin, it began to wither. It turned a pasty green color, drying up like a leaf in the sun. When I realized what was happening, I grabbed a pen off the desk, joining in as the controller shrieked in anguish and agony. As the controller took his last breath, I looked to my father, celebrating our triumph, but stopped dead. Coming off of my father's skin were thin, chalky white flakes. As I watched in horror, my father's skin seemed to evaporate, yet he didn't look scared. He looked courageous, like the father I had always known. As he dissolved into the air, he managed to choke out a final message, "Honey, I love you. I will always love you. Stay strong."