

Survivors

Prologue

The day everything went wrong, the boy had been at home with his mother. Temerim had felt excited; he rarely got to play with her nowadays, since she was so busy at her job as a doctor. She was one of the best, people would say, and had helped many, but Temerim didn't care. At that time, he was only an innocent boy of nine summers, and knew nothing of suffering. He wanted all of her attention, as most children do. Since Temerim's father had left when he was only four, the two remaining family members were somewhat closer than normal.

They'd just started playing hide-and-seek when a cry rang out over the town of Rengar. The young boy didn't yet realize it, but the four words said would change his life forever.

"The town's under attack!"

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Enna knew what was happening; had been expecting it, even. But not now, not this early. There'd been civilian soldiers stationed a mile outside Rengar; they couldn't have already fallen! Despite her disbelief, the woman didn't, couldn't hesitate. Her son's life depended on the speed and wisdom of her next decision. If he stayed, he would be killed by the invading Aeronians. Even though it was nearly impossible to let him go, knowing that she might never see him again (she was a doctor, and would be needed to heal the wounded), she knew what she had to do.

"Temerim." Her voice was shaking even though she tried to be strong for him, causing the young boy to look up in mild worry. "I need you to run as fast as you can. Don't stop, and don't let anybody see you. Now go!" Her son heard the panic and desperation in her voice, and became terrified, but she was his

Mommy, after all, so he'd listen to her, and with a final hug he ran. Enna watched him disappear from her sight and whispered, "Goodbye, my son." The woman hurriedly wiped away the tears rolling down her face, then turned around and sprinted towards the sounds of clashing metal.

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He was beyond scared. In the darkness of the cave he knew so well from hours spent playing in it, nobody would be able to find him. Temerim could still hear the screams, though. For what seemed like forever in that unforgiving, timeless hole, the cries echoed over and over, becoming a ghostly symphony. He rocked back and forth, hands now over his ears, now on his mouth to keep from screaming, now trying desperately to ward off the infernal noise. Eventually the child managed to fall into a restless sleep, plagued by nightmares and repeating memories of the haunted look in his mother's eyes as she told him to run. In the eternal night of that cave, the boy knew true fear.

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Morning came and Temerim woke. The world outside was silent and he couldn't bear to stay in that dark place anymore, so he crept slowly out, blinking in the harsh light. When his vision cleared, he whimpered. His entire town had been burned to the ground. Everywhere he looked it was like something from a horror story: shattered glass and blood (don't think about it, he told himself) and broken buildings and glowing embers and smoke was in the air and ash covered everything like a black snow. He moaned softly, and forced himself to forget about how everything he knew was gone.

From that moment, his body seemed to go on autopilot. He wasn't all there; it was as if he was simply watching a horrible mockery of himself looking for food and water. He watched as he came across the first body, hidden behind the barest skeleton of a house; watched as he passed piles of dead things (not people, not his friends, not his family, they're not, they can't be); watched as one day passed, and

another. It was only when he heard someone behind him did he come back to his body. He turned around quickly. Was it an Aeronian soldier, coming back to finish the job by killing him? No. It was a haggard, exhausted-looking woman. She must be a survivor, he thought detachedly, like me. So he wasn't the only one left to suffer in this cruel world. It was the barest of reliefs. Temerim was wrenched back into the real world when she spoke softly, as if scared he might run away.

"I won't hurt you." A pause. "My name is Seren."

Part One: Crover

During the first few weeks of his journey, he did nothing but think about the three mistakes that led to the war, and to him joining this clan.

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When they actually happened, he had no idea that the mistakes would have such devastating consequences.

The first wasn't his fault, but that of the government. The country that shared their border had been restless, violent. There'd been rumors that they were looking for fights, and wanted more land. Even he, who wasn't exactly quick to worry, thought his country needed protection, in the form of experienced soldiers. However, the government was too proud to ask anyone else to help them, even if a war might arise. Therefore, when the fights and the riots finally escalated into full-blown warfare, they had only stand-in civilians to save them.

That was the first mistake. The next, he'd admit, was his own fault. Some of their neighbours left the town as soon as they heard the rumors to find somewhere safer. Even if he had been a bit worried, it

wasn't enough to convince him to take his wife and flee their house, which had been in his family's possession for generations. The government would eventually see the need for soldiers, right? Now, he wished more than (almost) anything that they'd left when they had the chance.

The final mistake was the one he regretted making the most. Why had he let her out of his sight that day? He'd heard the reports of enemy soldiers getting close to the town; seen the worried looks on the so-called protectors' faces. He berated himself endlessly for believing the government's hollow, unlikely claims that they'd be safe. If he hadn't been so foolish, his wife would still be with him, not gods know where. For all he knew, she was dead; had been killed by the invading soldiers. If only he had stayed by her side. If only he had listened to her pleas to leave! If, if, if.

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The grief and self-hatred were taking their toll. Three weeks after the clan found him, he started shutting himself down; casting off his emotions. The one thing keeping him going was the hope that he'd finally find his beloved, and be able to apologize for all his mistakes.

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"The town is falling!"

These words had come too late. If they'd been said earlier, then maybe he'd have escaped with his wife, instead of with his new clan. He'd been near the battle when the words were yelled, and had watched in disbelief as, one by one, those who were supposed to protect them, play the hero's role, were brought to their knees and killed.

After a moment of grief, he ran towards his home, praying silently to whatever gods he could think of that his wife was safe. All around him, people were panicking as the soldiers flooded into the town. Screams ripped through the air as civilians were attacked and beaten by the enemy. He ignored the

pain-filled cries as much as he could. He couldn't think of the fact that if people here were dying, his beloved could be as well. Turning on to the street he'd called home for many years, the man came to a dead stop. Two large soldiers were cornering his wife outside their house. Everything seemed to move in slow motion as one of them hit her, before grabbing her arm. Letting out a strangled cry, he launched himself forward with a speed he never knew he had.

He was oblivious to everything except the screams of his wife as she was being dragged away. He raced towards her, arm outstretched as if he believed he could pull her to him with only his desperate hope. One of the soldiers saw him, and shouted for him to stop or be punished, but he kept going. With a desperate leap, he tackled the soldier to the ground; punched his face before being pulled off by his other enemy. As he was struggling, he cried out to his wife to go and save herself. The last thing the man saw before falling unconscious from pain was his love running off as she was told, tears rolling down her face, screaming out his name.

"CROVER!"

When he came to, he was being carried. For a few peaceful moments, he did not remember the horrible events he'd just been through. But, as he eventually learned, peace never lasts. In a rush, his memories returned, and he started struggling against the men carrying him, but he couldn't do much harm, as he was still weak with pain. After he went limp, one of the men next to him spoke up.

"You're safe 'ere", he said. "We found you blacked out with two of them soldiers pulling you off. Managed to free you; knocked 'em out with our numbers. We're from one of the smaller towns that's already been taken, but we managed t'escape those monsters. Since then we've been trying to find a

safe haven, and rescuin' anyone we can. Got about four-and-thirty in our little clan here. Hope you'll join us, though we ain't much for entertainment, what with the all the madness we're goin' through."

With this, the man gave him a mirthless smile. He didn't really have any other options, and realized that he'd have the same chance of finding his wife as he would searching by himself. He wouldn't, couldn't think about the possibility of her being dead; his hope was already falling, and any grief would kill him.

Nodding his head, he started this strange new clan life, and his final journey.

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The sun beats down upon his bare head. He is in a constant struggle with thirst and starvation, and as the days turn to weeks he, just as every other member of his clan, starts to lose the battle. There is no respite from the elements in this ironic journey. That which is supposed to bring him and the others to a better place, a better life, is slowly killing him.

Sixty-five days after his personal migration begins it ends. They've arrived at a settlement; a small town. What he finds brings him to his knees. This place is identical to the one they left: war-torn and chaotic. The few people they see have gaunt, sallow faces, as if they were spectres; empty remnants of a time long past. The clan is not welcome here. They'll receive no aid or food.

Just as the man collapsed to his knees, so fall his dreams of paradise; a land without war or strife, hate or grief, and where he and his wife are reunited. He is stricken, has been for longer than he can remember, with a longing for peace. Now, he gives up all hope; it is worth nothing, has deceived and eluded him for so long. In his final moments the man, who has become weary of life, realizes that death must be better than this living hell, and opens his arms wide to embrace and welcome it; lets his grief kill him. The others in his group force themselves to keep walking, away from his body and their sadness of his demise and of the ghost town, with all its lost souls. If they don't, they know from experience that

they'll never survive; never reach the promised land, their land of dreams. And so, as it has done so many times before, the clan separates its body from its mind, becoming the walking dead, and continues on its endless journey.

Part Two: The Strength of Two

The woman ran. She ran faster than ever before, even though it killed her to do it. She had to survive, so that she could reunite with her husband. Crover... she'd abandoned him. Sure, he'd told her to, and yes, she'd been absolutely terrified but SHE LEFT HIM. The guilt, she knew, would stay with her for the rest of her life.

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Seren woke up outside a city. She did not remember falling asleep, and figured she'd collapsed from the exertion. Her surroundings were bleak, not much better than the desert she had been running through. Seren vaguely recognized the ruined city as Rengar, an outpost south of her hometown. She'd lived there for a while. How had she gotten here? She must have been running in a circle, trying to avoid the invading military. Seren glanced around, taking in the war-torn state of the area: most of the buildings she could see were either completely destroyed or falling apart. There were debris and ashes (probably from burned homes) littering the ground.

Her body froze as she heard a low creaking coming from inside of the guard tower, which was really little more than a tall building. Creeping closer, Seren found that the source of the sound was a child rummaging through the wreckage. Why was he alone? Where was everyone else? A shiver ran over her as many possible (rather frightening) explanations flew through her mind. Were they all dead? She desperately hoped she was wrong. Besides, the presence of the child showed that at least someone had

survived. Clearing her head, Seren walked towards the young boy. He couldn't have been more than nine summers of age. The suntanned head shot up as he heard her footsteps, and he stood frozen, watching her with a scared expression.

"I won't hurt you," she found herself saying. "My name is Seren. I'm from Garnin. I... escaped from Suoa's forces and came here. Are you alone?" When the foreign king-turned-conqueror was mentioned, the child shook a little. However, he seemed less wary of her and didn't move when she came closer to him. After a moment, he replied in a shaky voice, as if rough from lack of use.

"I am Temerim. I... I am the last one alive." He started trembling, and Seren cautiously put her arms around his small, gaunt body for comfort. "They came on horses. Nobody was ready for them. The... the government said that they would send lots and lots of soldiers to help us, but they lied! We were alone.... everyone died except me! Mommy...." Here Temerim choked back a sob, even though tears were already streaming down his face. "Mommy told me to run, before they got to us, and I did, 'cause I was really scared. I hid in a cave I always play in on a hill, and nobody found me. I think I fell asleep, 'cause when I went back Mommy was gone, just like everyone else..." Temerim's wobbly voice trailed off, and she pulled him even closer, saying nothing. They'd both run away from a loved one and found themselves alone, but he was just a child! No young one should ever have to go through that, yet he did. She subconsciously vowed to herself that she would take care of him, and together they would find their families. She didn't let herself think about how Crover and the boy's mother might already be dead. After giving the boy a few moments to let his tears out, she gave him her hand and pulled him up.

"Temerim." He looked up at her with eyes so sad her heart almost broke again. "I swear to you that I will help you find your mother, no matter what. So stop crying, because I know we'll find her soon. Just you wait." The young one's tired eyes lit up marginally at this.

"Thank you," he murmured. Together they headed farther into Rengar, looking for other survivors.

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Temerim waited by the remains of the local government building for Seren. The boy of eleven summers was used to this by now. Even though they'd only met two years ago, Seren had quickly become his stand-in parental figure. She always took care of him, finding food and shelter, as well as leading them far away from the enemies' camps. Suoa's men were becoming more common, but the one time they'd actually been discovered, Seren had managed to knock out the soldier with a well-thrown rock.

It was just the two of them nowadays. Even though they had found a few other survivors, and usually stayed with them for a week or two, Seren was too busy hunting for news of her husband and Temerim was just as impatient for word of his mother. The other survivors would eventually leave and join up with the resistance group that was forming in the ruins of Temmid, a northern city. He knew it was far too small to do any real damage, though.

The boy didn't flinch when Seren walked up behind him. He was completely at ease with her, and she was glad of it. For the first few months after meeting, the youth was constantly nervous. She understood his fear, and never mentioned it. This was not the only change she'd noticed in Temerim, however, and she didn't like it. When they met, he was practically innocent; even though it had invaded and destroyed his town, he hadn't actually seen any war. But now, he knew exactly what it was, and it was affecting him in a bad way. Even though she'd tried to talk him out of it, he felt the same thing she did: guilt at having left behind a loved one. She could see it weighed heavily on his heart. Her own guilt was just as heavy; she had nightmares every week, forcing her to relive abandoning Crover. Seren hoped that they'd find Temerim's mother before either of them succumbed to their emotions. The woman was distracted from her thoughts by the slowly-deepening voice of Temerim.

"Find anything good?" He forbade himself from adding "because I'm starving". Even though they both knew it was true, he didn't want to add to Seren's guilt. They'd found less and less food each month;

everything was being taken by either the soldiers or the other survivors. Her reply was the same as always.

"Nothing this time, Temerim. I'm sure we'll find something soon." The boy knew she wasn't simply talking about food. She was also referring to the fact that there was still no news about his mom or her husband. Mommy.... He missed her so much. Seren was trying her best to distract him from her absence, he knew, and he was grateful to his self-named caretaker, but guilt was still creeping through the cracks in his mind. "It's okay, Seren. We'll make it through this." At some point, he'd started trying to reassure her as well. The woman gave him a small smile, before her constantly clouded eyes darkened slightly. "There's nothing left for us here. We should join up with the clan that's been roaming around. They've been resting in the ruins of Quinn for a while now. There's a chance that my husband and your mom are with them. If they aren't, we'll head up to Temmid and check there." Neither of them had any desire to go up there, as it was the closest town to Aeron, the invading country. However, in the end, they'd go to the ends of the world without hesitation if they could see their loved ones again. Decision made, the two survivors set out on the next leg of their desperate journey.

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Night blanketed the world. Temerim had woken silently; he wondered what had disturbed his sleep. Listening intently, he heard something that made his blood run cold: voices. He could tell by their accents that they were Aeronian. Crawling towards Seren, he prayed that the soldiers wouldn't notice them. Shaking the woman of thirty-something summers' shoulder and putting a hand over her mouth, he waited for her to wake.

Seren's eyes shot open as soon as she felt the hand on her shoulder. The only reason she didn't panic was because she recognized the smell of the boy. She looked up at him with a question in her eyes. He, in turn, looked at something to their right. She followed his gaze and bit back a gasp. A campfire...

Temerim wouldn't have woken her if it was other survivors, so they must be soldiers. The boy let her up, and she looked down at the light. They'd been sleeping on the second storey of what used to be a convenience store, which probably explained why they hadn't been spotted earlier.

"Temerim. I need you to stay here." She could see he didn't like the idea of abandoning another loved one, but he said nothing. "I'm going to try to take them by surprise. If one of them gets away and comes up here, knock him out with debris or something if you know you can. If you can't, RUN. I'll join up with you as soon as I can." Without giving him time to complain, she picked up a large rock and climbed down to the firelight.

Temerim hated not being able to help her. He couldn't see anything, but heard one of the men gasping in pain before falling over. One of the others (how many were there? Two? Three?) cursed and unsheathed his sword.

"Who's there? Show yerself, you Hylorn rat!" There was no reply, but Temerim could hear someone walking around. Someone tripped, and a female scream was heard. No! Without a thought for his own safety, the boy grabbed a shard of glass and leapt down. In the firelight he could barely see a man standing over the prone body of Seren. With a strangled cry, he lunged at the soldier and brought the makeshift weapon down on his head. The Aeronian collapsed without a sound. Temerim ran over to Seren. Her shoulder was bleeding profusely from a sword cut, but she was alive and conscious. She hissed in pain, and managed to gasp "There are no more soldiers" before screaming again. Temerim pulled off his shirt and wrapped it around her injury, completely disregarding the biting wind. He worked silently to stop the bleeding; during the long months alone, they'd both learned how to deal with injuries. This wound, though, was more serious than any previous one, and he was worried she'd die from blood loss. He wrapped the shoulder as tightly as he dared, and started talking to Seren to keep her awake.

"Come on, Seren! Stay awake. You can't die here. We still need to find your husband and my mom! Remember Crover? You've told me about him, how he loves you so much, just like my Mommy loves me. Tell me more about him, Seren. Talk to me!" He was unaware of the tears streaming down his face as the thought of her dying entered his mind. He couldn't lose her too.

When Seren replied, her voice was weak and unsure.

"Crover... was amazing. He cares so much about me. He's so determined in everything he does; never gives up, that man. He's a bit of a joker, could always make me smile, but could also be serious. We met... three-and-ten years ago, in Rengar... he was looking for a job there. He'd just come in from Garnin. It was really just a lucky chance that we met at all..." The bleeding was slowing down, and the world was brightening as the sun rose. "I miss him, Temerim. I miss him so much..." And with that, Seren finally broke down crying. The ten year old hugged her, able to comfort her now that he wasn't quite as worried for her safety. Through her muddled thoughts she noticed something rather unimportant- he was almost two inches taller than he was when she found him. She let out the first real laugh she'd had in forever as something about that struck her, in her slightly delirious state, as hilarious. Just as he was changing, so was the world. Everything seemed backwards: he was comforting her now, instead of the other way around; and the world of survivors was becoming almost normal, instead of being completely wrong.

Even though he had no idea why she was laughing, the joyous sound was so contagious that he forgot about the worries of the night and joined her.

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When the sun finally rose, it was upon two people, a woman and a child, laughing together like old friends in a perfect world, despite only knowing each other for a pair of life-changing years.

Part Three: Ghost Town

Tunghan.

It was once a proud mining town, home to half a thousand people. Because of that blasted war, it became a mere shadow of its former, glorious self. In that time of terror, nobody was well-off. Neighbour relied on neighbour. Food stores were low, but they at least had water, courtesy of their underground rivers. In that regard, he supposed, they were better off than most other places, such as the main food producers, Fongo and Aria. They'd both been wiped off the map, or as well as. According to rumours, though, the capital was doing just fine. Because so many important people, like King Vojjer, lived in Oprillia, it seemed that the few soldiers they'd gotten from their western border-sharer Anjula had been ordered to protect Oprillia alone. Because, of course, who cares about the common-folk? It's not like they do anything important. Who needs food? The point is, Tunghan was pretty much ruined by the war. The people left alive became the living dead; spirits forced to haunt the town forever. The ramshackle, war-torn look of Tunghan just reinforced this idea.

One of the few men not in a constant state of brooding was the mayor, Clyne. He was rather happy-go-lucky, like nothing could ever completely bring him down. Before the devastation, people could often be heard wondering how he managed to snag the high position. Now, he was the only source of hope for his townsfolk. They'd learned that, despite first impressions, Clyne was somewhat ingenious, and cared deeply for innocents. It was with his help that the 'spirits' had survived so long: the seven-and-sixty year old had developed the rationing plan, among other things. They had very little food stored, and almost no way to make it. This was why, when a large clan of survivors had come looking for help, he'd refused, even though it almost broke his heart to do so. His humanity wouldn't allow him to simply ignore the

body they left behind, though, so he had someone draw an illustration of the man in case his family came looking for him before burying him. However, when a child had appeared, carrying an unconscious woman, he couldn't just throw them out. Children were always the most important thing to him.

He listened to the boy's story, of how they'd been living on their own for the past two years. Clyne was, quite frankly, amazed at their resilience. To survive in a town was one thing, but to do so with a complete stranger? He could tell the boy left out some details, probably the more personal ones. The mayor had no idea why they'd wanted to stay alone, but his attention was redirected to the woman when the boy told him that her shoulder had been sliced open by an Aeronian's sword. The two had believed her to be fine, and had been heading out to join the very clan he'd once refused, but she'd collapsed just outside of his town. After hearing this, Clyne immediately summoned the best healer remaining in the town. She was a refugee from one of the southern towns, he remembered. When had she arrived? Oh yes, now he remembered. She'd gotten here much the same way the boy had; half dead after escaping the enemy. That had been two years ago, near the beginning of the war. When he told this to the boy, his eyes brightened up considerably, as if a miracle had just occurred. Clyne wondered about it, but let it go when the very woman they'd just been talking about entered the room.

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It

was

her.

Without a thought, he flung himself at her, unable to truly believe she was real.

"MOM!" He couldn't stop himself from letting it out. If the woman hadn't figured out who the boy was from his appearance, she knew it now.

"Temerim?" She said his name almost reverently. "You're alive..." She wrapped her arms around him and pulled him to her, whispering his name again and again. The woman was about to ask him what had happened when she felt him stiffen. She followed his gaze to a nearby table, upon which was laid a young woman, probably the person she'd been called to heal. She was flailing around silently, her face a mask of pain.

"What's going on?! Help Seren!" Temerim practically screamed the words. He felt numb, and didn't notice when the person he'd been searching endlessly for left his side, and hurried over to his adopted guardian and friend. Seren looked horrible: her face was the picture of unimaginable pain, and her mouth was moving, but nothing came. Seeing the person he'd come to care so deeply about in such pain chilled him to the bone. He couldn't even do anything about it, but he went to her side anyway, grasping her too-cold hand and praying to every god that she'd survive this unknown menace.

This is the first section of a novel in progress. I feel this section works as its own short story, and have submitted it as such.