

~Scars and Ashes~

The fire crackled and sizzled. Sparks ignited the air, then just as quickly shriveled into ash. The sparks of the fire sounded like that of popcorn in the microwave, overpowering the soft chirping of bugs in the background which had become just that, background. The pungent smell of smoke stained the air. Although at this point, it seemed almost unrecognizable. In the distance, a uniform line of bold trees and clandestine bushes buried themselves away, hiding from the meticulous, infallible fire. The unusually broad embers that sported a malicious grin and sinister yellow eyes that stared intently through the armor of watchers, and laughed. The night was early. The wind carried a cool breeze. The sky glowed a mellow ocean of blue, with a full moon swimming in the middle, sending ripples of stars across the sky. But the fire melted the cool breeze. The smoke polluted the ocean and shattered the moon. At some distance the beauty of the fire snuck in, but reach too close, and it burned.

And some scars never mend as good as others, but that didn't matter. The only thing that mattered was the fire, the heat of the fire on the skin. The feeling like something has the power to kill but for whatever reason shows mercy, maybe for a fate worse than what was expected.

The loathsome isolation that the fire presented with its bold, assiduous presence and gnarled appearance brought true terror to the young man. Not the kind of fear that requests a scream, but one that begs the hair on the skin to stand on end and the eyes to stare until tears ran down frozen, pink cheeks. But, for the man, the terror didn't phase him. He wandered somewhere else. To memories years past. To scars ever vigilant with little resolution to be seen.

The young man sat mute on a dry log facing the fire. He watched the sparks fly in the air, then sizzle into nothing. He smelled the smoke that clung to his sweatshirt like a tick. Past the fire he saw trees in the corner of his eyes, arms outstretched, reaching for him. He heard the popcorn sparks fling into the air. And he felt the heat of the flame on his cheeks. But he wasn't thinking about them. He couldn't even see them. He could see the trees, but the smoke from the fire blended them together. He heard the bugs, but the popping of the sparks overwhelmed their soft song. Those things didn't matter. What mattered was the fire. The senses in the fire. Like a prison, his thoughts were trapped within.

A spark flew in the air.

When will I see her again? Will I ever?

Maybe I can-

No, you can't, she's already gone.

no.

*You know you can't, you know you will never,
Why do you even try? What's the point?*

The point is she made me feel like- the spark sizzled into ash, and likewise, a sliver of his hope. And for a single peaceful moment there was nothing, nothing but the sound of the flame and little whispers of the bugs behind. Just as quickly as the spark had risen, it had sizzled away.

The smoke of the fire subtly subdued, and the peaks of the trees swooped in. The man saw the maternal arms and reached out to them. The fire retaliated and bit his hand. A harsh burn overtook his flesh. He winced in pain and grabbed a roll of bandage and wrapped his hand. A roll of bandage that was tragically half used. His forearm: covered in burn scars. Another spark flew in the air and the senses snuck in once more.

What would you do for her, what would you sacrifice?
Anything, my life if I have to. . .

The fire's right here.
No, that's not the answer,
there's no point if I'm dead.

Without her in life, or with her in death.
But she's not dead-

she could be, we can make her, it would be easy.
All we'd have to do is-

The spark crippled away. He could tell that the fire was growing weaker, but he wondered if it was good or bad. What would he be without the fire? Nothing, he decided.

His eyes tracked a third spark bounding from the fire, this one was the weakest of the three. It was hardly a voice, only an image, an image and a single word. The image drained into his mind. *A red bottle of lighter fluid.* It sat desolate in a patch of grass. Never had he seen it vividly, for he never needed to, but the picture was so definite he could read the fine print labels. He opened his eyes and to his right, the bottle sat idly in a ruffled patch of grass.

With a jolt, the bottle rhythmically pulsated, the plastic contracting, over and over again. *Thump Thump . . . Thump Thump . . . Thump Thump . . .*

At first when he heard the word he thought it was just the soft whispering of the woods. The sharp wind cutting through hollow logs and blade-like branches. But swiftly, he realized it wasn't coming from the woods. It was coming from deep within the depths of the fire. *Cleanse . . .* The thumping of the bottle started to beat at a faster rhythm. The beating became deafening, now sounding like the beat of a drum. *Cleanse! . . .* The whispering became an incessant chant. *Cleanse! Cleanse! . . .* He arose and (almost without realizing it) grabbed the red, beating, bottle of lighter fluid. *Cleanse! . . .*

His hands trembled while clenching the fuel. His mind raced back and forth. The fire behind him began to diminish. Without the lighter fluid it would go out. He already felt the freezing air sneak in. The trees reached in, not with open arms but with gritted fists. *Cleanse! . . .* Tears tumbled down his cheeks. No matter how

many thousand times he begged himself, he couldn't forget her. Subconsciously he knew that once he forgot about her, he would be bound to pay twice the toll for one loss.

Cleanse! Cleanse! Cleanse! He covered his eyes with his other trembling hand. Despite his best efforts, his hands failed to erase the world around him. A mysterious light poked through the cracks in his fingers. When he looked up, a pure white firefly perched itself inches from his face. He noticed soft whispering murmur from around him. At first he didn't know where the sound was coming from, but then he realized the whimper became louder as the light on the firefly illuminated brighter. The firefly seemed to be talking to him, but when it talked, it was not the voice of the firefly. It was *her* voice, and when he listened closer he heard a message. An old message, but far from forgotten.

"It's okay to be upset. I'm upset too. But it's not like I'm gone. I'll always remember the time we had together, and I hope you do too. And who knows, maybe next time it won't be like this, it'll be better," The man stared blank faced. He remembered that day as if it were his last, and it might as well have been. For a moment this message sat with him in silence. He forgot he was holding the bottle, gripped sensibly near his chest. He always wondered what she meant when she said that, how could anything be better than that? From the long grass another firefly arose. *Cleanse! . . .*

"Don't worry, if the world wants us to meet again, then we will, and if we don't meet again, then the world made that decision too, so we might as well trust in the world rather than spending our whole life dreading anew." The words spoken by the fairest of lips to the most hopeful of ears. Ears that had never heard such sweet words from sweet lips until then.

Another firefly arose, *Cleanse! . . .* then another, *Cleanse! . . .* then another, *Cleanse! . . .* until hundreds of fireflies swarmed him. The blinding lights of the fireflies slashed his eyes. The insects wailed as the chanting became screams of terror. *"Why do you have to go?" Cleanse! Cleanse! "When will you be-" Cleanse! Cleanse!"* He held the bottle close to his chest as it beat like a baseball bat striking his gut. *"You know I have to-" Cleanse! CLEANSE! "Promise me you'll m-" CLEANSE! CLEANSE! "I love you," CLEANSE! CLEANSE!* The beating became too much for him to handle. He threw the bottle of lighter fluid into the fire. . .

The fire erupted into an inferno of flames and sparks. The fire swallowed the fireflies whole. The charred insect bodies plummeted into the long grass. The fire roared, reaching twice as tall as he was. As the fire swelled, he felt the flames boil his cheeks. He felt the heat of the fire shoot through him like an arrow. The sparks that previously sounded of popcorn now sounded like dynamite. A spark plummeted onto his arm, he coiled in pain. *Find her! Find her and ki-* Another spark erupted from the flames and landed on his chest. *Forget about her, you don't need her!* Another spark landed on his forehead, his teeth grinded together in pain. *Kill her!*

Sparks began blasting from the fire, piercing him. *Kill her! She must be gone! Kill her! Kill her! Kill her!* A deep roar cascaded from the fire.

"CLEANSE!"

The man let out a bellowing cry of agony. "No!" he wailed. The last of his body's strength accumulated as he dove into the heart of the flame, landing outstretched on his back. As he broke apart the logs, sparks exploded out from the fire like a volcano. He lay screaming on his back in the flames as they ate him. He felt blisters popping upon his face and horribly all across his whole body. He screamed as the fire screamed back. Screaming so loud that it pierced his ears. Screaming so painfully deafening that it tore through the sharp branches and hollow logs and could be heard from miles away. Screaming that screeched into the sky and well above the smokey black cirrus clouds. His body seized from head to toe. He felt the flames first start to burn his eyebrows and hair. Then he felt his clothes light up and burn to nothing. The hairs on his arms and legs caught ablaze and incinerated to the roots. His lips cracked and bled as he shrieked.

As the screaming from the heart of the fire became louder, devilish hands burst from the flames, black charred hands that reached for him. The scolding hot hands grasped him, decimating every inch they touched. The sparks howled incomprehensible sounds as they dragged him into the ashes of the flame. The fire fully engulfed him into the ashes. Then, it consequently followed him, imploding into itself like a dying star.

The last thing left of the dying fire was an exposed heart amongst the ashes. A red pulsating heart that lay in the gray dust. The heart that had once beat like a drum, was now nothing but a whimper. Until the heart too was pulled underground by the ashes of a hand. Nothing was left but the ashes. The ashes that were once a mighty flame, now nothing but little lost thoughts.

The field that once housed a lonely young man has now returned to what it had been before. A long line of bold trees reclaim their territory over the smoke. The only sparks that remain are those of fireflies illuminating the delightfully chilly blue night sky. The smell of smoke gingerly remains in piles of ash, but only lingers to the refreshing smell of fresh grass and tree sap. The popcorn sound of the sparks are long dormant and are replaced with the sound of crickets whispering. The moon swims passionately in the ocean of the night sky with its ripples sending stars shining endlessly. The heat of the flames were buried with the fire. And in its place a cool night's breeze chilled the air.

The ashes of the fire are still there. The scars, with time, fade, but never quite heal perfectly. But someday the scars turn unrecognizable and simply become a part of the whole. Then when they deem useless, they disappear, because they don't matter anymore. They never do.