

## “The Sun Waker” / “Braving the Dragon” Excerpt

*The following is an excerpt from a book, titled “The Sun Waker”, that I had the fortune and wonderful experience of writing back in 2021. It’s taken from a story I’d written about a young man with the disease sickle cell anemia, which predominantly impacts people from the African-American community. With the story, I had wanted to raise awareness on a disease that I learned was very commonplace but that, perhaps due to the racial inequalities present, received less attention compared to other diseases. I also wanted to raise awareness on what it’s like for one to have the disease, and the story explores some of the emotions and feelings, both physical and mental, that the main character feels as a result of having his disease and the lack of effective solutions available, along with how it impacts his relationships with others.*

Friday night had arrived.

I stood in front of the mirror outside my closet, examining my gray short-sleeve polo shirt and neatly-trimmed haircut. I had on a glittering black watch that once belonged to dad, which I usually wore only on special occasions. The ceiling bulb bathed me in pale yellow light, and I viewed myself from different angles in the mirror, just to make sure I looked my best before heading out on my very first date.

As Amanda and I had known each other for a while now, I didn’t feel too worried. Neither did mom, who had just entered my bedroom to see me off. As she looked me up and down, she whistled appreciatively and handed me a clear glass bottle of orange liquid.

“You’re looking great, honey. D’you want to use one of Princess’s fragrances?”

I sprayed the bottle around my shirt and instantly inhaled the citrusy aroma normally associated with my sister.

“Thanks,” I said. I handed her back the bottle, wondering whether it would’ve been better to have used a different fragrance that didn’t leave me smelling like an orange. I was also glad that Princess hadn’t returned from work, as she likely wouldn’t have approved of me using her perfumes.

A few minutes later, a light breeze welcomed me as I stepped outside the apartment and headed for the stairs.

“Have you told Amanda yet that you’ve stopped taking your medications?” mom asked from the doorway.

I pursed my lips.

“Not yet. I’ll tell her.”

Mom nodded, looking concerned, but she smiled.

“Well, I hope you both have a great time!” She waved at me and closed the door.

As I headed down the stairs, the sky came into view. Thunder rumbled in the distance, and I could see thick gray clouds slowly blanketing the stars. I tried not to take that as an ominous sign.

I started the ignition in the mini-van and rolled out of the parking space; I thought I could see mom looking at me from our apartment window, though I wasn’t sure because it was dark.

As I drove, I tapped my fingers on the steering wheel, listening to some music. While I pondered how to tell Amanda that I stopped taking my medications, a bothersome thought floated in my head.

Maybe we should've just stayed friends. After all, I'd stopped taking the medications that were supposed to control my sickle cell anemia symptoms. Nothing had really improved in my condition. I was still at square one, still in the situation where my life would be marred by pain crises. Building a long-term relationship with Amanda only made sense if I knew that I would have a long life ahead of me — but if I was still going to have the crises, then would I? As it was, the medications didn't actually cure me, so I was still at risk of dying an early death.

I tried not to think about how my future seemed kind of bleak, and how maybe I was making a mistake in giving Amanda — and myself — false hope.

Sweat coated the steering wheel as my hands perspired, and my heart rate kept climbing, showing no desire to go back down. As I ignored the queasy sensation inside my stomach, I noticed that more clouds were coagulating above me.

Five minutes later, I reached the restaurant. And at that moment, a horribly-familiar, disquieting feeling crept up my body like vines scaling a building.

*No*, I thought with a flash of panic. *Not now!* I willed myself to plow ahead, and parked the car.

I entered the restaurant and greeted the hostess, who looked around for a table. As I glanced at the sky through the window, my stomach lurched; somehow, I could tell that things were not going to get better.

Once the hostess had seated me, I wiped my forehead with some of the napkins and gulped down a glass of ice-cold water. I'd come ten minutes early. Hopefully I'd feel better by the time Amanda came.

The clouds outside had flattened into a drab mass of black, resembling the artwork of a bratty kid who'd smeared charcoal all over a sheet of paper.

And at that moment, my head threatened to explode.

Pain flared up all across my body, which felt as though it was on fire. My arms, shoulders, stomach — everything — was getting crushed in a compactor. I clutched the table edge with trembling hands, feeling sweat pour down my pounding head.

I gritted my teeth. *Of course* — it had to be on my first, and only date. I wanted to get out of here, to leave, but a feeling of shame, of weakness, gripped me. All I wanted to do was enjoy dinner with a friend! Why couldn't I have that?

The restaurant's ambience — packed with chattering, laughing people scraping their utensils across plates and the screeching of chairs being shuffled across the floor — did nothing to help, and I felt white-hot knives cut every inch of my body as the pain worsened. As everyone seemed to be busy, nobody noticed that I was slowly sinking into my seat. I wanted to scream.

Finally, I couldn't stand it any longer. I stood, resting a heavy hand on the table, and hobbled away.

At the same moment, Amanda stepped inside the restaurant.

She looked awesome. She had on a forest-green shirt tucked above a pink skirt. Her blonde hair had been done in curls, and she even wore these round, pearly earrings. She beamed at me, her eyes shining as luminously as the earrings.

And then she saw the sweat dripping down my forehead and my pained expression, and her smile crumbled.

“Oh my god!” Amanda put an arm underneath my shoulder to give me some support. “Are you okay?”

“I’m — I’m having a pain crisis.” I exhaled as another spasm of pain blasted my back. “I’m really sorry, but can you — can you take me to the hospital?” I looked at her pleadingly.

“Please?”

“Yeah, come on!” Amanda took my arm, and we rushed out of the restaurant.

The wind whipped her hair as the storm approached, and leaves chased each other around like quarreling siblings. Just as I stepped inside Amanda’s vintage car, the first drops of rain fell on her windshield.

The car groaned as Amanda turned the key, from which dangled a leather keychain with a white cross over a red background: the Swiss cross. Amanda’s car happened to be just as decrepit on the inside as I imagined. It had a damp, moldy smell. The carpeted floor felt fuzzy, and dust billowed out as I sat in the passenger seat; I even saw one of those slots for cassette tapes in between the radio knobs.

Just my luck if the car broke down on our way to the hospital.

Amanda glanced at me with concern as she drove, but otherwise, she seemed composed and focused.

“You’re gonna be okay. You’re gonna be okay,” she kept muttering. I think she was talking more to herself than to me.

“Which hospital do I go to?” Amanda asked.

“Just the nearest one,” I managed to say through shortened breaths. Now that I was with her, I relaxed a little. “Pretty embarrassing,” I muttered angrily. “I’m really sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry, you’re fine! Do you go to the hospital every time you have a pain crisis?”

“No. The doctors give me narcotics to take home in case I’m having a pain crisis, so I don’t always have to go to them.”

“So why not today?”

As the pain soared to astronomic heights, I stifled a scream and squeezed my eyes shut, shuddering in the seat. All thoughts of what Princess would say to me about going to the hospital for another emergency left my mind; I just had to get this pain sorted out. When I opened my eyes, I saw Amanda staring at me, her expression alarmed.

“Because...this one’s really, really bad. I need something stronger, and only the doctors are allowed to administer it.”

We reached the hospital, and Amanda dropped me off at the ER entrance. It was a different hospital than the one I usually went to, but right now, all that mattered was that I get treated.

“Go inside, I’ll come with you after I’ve parked the car,” Amanda said as I stepped out into the rain.

I shook my head, wallowing in embarrassment, resting a hand on the slippery door as though my life depended on it.

“It’s — it’s okay. I’ll be fine from here.”

Amanda raised her eyebrows.

“Really, it’s okay.” I felt angry with myself. The rain fell even harder. “I’m really sorry about how this whole thing went.”

“Don’t be stupid, I’ll join you,” Amanda said. Her tone was gentle, as though she somehow knew how I was feeling. “You should go before you get more wet.”

I was about to argue, but thought better of it. I simply nodded and left Amanda after closing the door.

As I entered the hospital through a set of sliding doors, a blast of chilly air rushed past me. All of a sudden, my teeth chattered as I stood, sopping wet, in the frigid hospital lobby. Inside me, however, my organs continued to burn with hateful, agonizing rage.

I headed towards the ER, a sense of doom overtaking me. This place felt new, unfamiliar, foreign. I knew nobody here; suddenly, coming to this hospital didn’t seem like such a good idea. But I couldn’t leave: my regular hospital was on the other side of town, and I was already here.

Each step felt like a blow to the head. I stumbled and shivered as I walked. The lifeless lighting, devoid of color, reflected off the ice-blue floor. I reached the ER, which was flooded with people,

some weak and coughing, some bored, others leaning against the chairs with fatigue. A long line had formed to see the triage nurse, and I stood at the very end, lengthening the chain by one more person.

Minutes of nauseating pain rolled by. I wondered whether Amanda had parked by now. As the line ahead of me kept getting lopped off, person by person, the desk grew larger in my sight.

Finally, my turn came, and I approached the desk. At first, I wasn't sure who to speak to. Then, I saw the stooped, harassed-looking figure in the chair.

She looked like an ancient tortoise, x-raying my appearance through watery black eyes. Her blue uniform made her look bigger than she probably was, and her wrinkly neck peeked out from it. A bonnet was wrapped around her head, covering what little I could see of her frazzled hair. Her tiny nimble hands snailed across the clipboard as she jotted down her first-glance observations, and her flat nose quivered.

"Hi..." She had a slow, tremulous voice. I could see more gums than teeth in her mouth. "What's your emergency?"

I spoke, each breath a Herculean effort.

"I'm — I'm having an acute sickle cell pain crisis, and I need pain relief."

"I'm sorry..." The nurse frowned, blinking feebly. "I don't recognize that.... Have you previously been a patient in our hospital?" Each word seemed to be costing her as much effort as it did for me.

"No — no, ma'am."



The nurse checked my vitals and jotted down some more notes, her frail hands moving dreadfully slow. She dropped her pen twice. I could hear the people behind me tapping their feet impatiently. I waited in bated breath for my wait time, and wished she would hurry up.

“Please have a seat...” the nurse croaked finally. “You’re at level four on the severity index — or, ‘Less Urgent’.... Expect a waiting time of 60 minutes.”

All the air had been punched out of me. My fingers slipped from the edge of the desk. The ground threatened to swallow me as I looked back at the nurse, dazed.

“What?” I whispered. Panic rose inside. “No, no — look, ma’am. This is — this is an emergency.”

“We understand, dear.... You’re in pain and you need pain relief... You want to be seen as fast as possible...but we also have people who need our care right away...”

“I know,” I said hurriedly, “but — I’m serious — this counts as life-threatening, I can die —”

“We know you’re suffering...” The nurse looked frightened that I hadn’t moved yet, and she eyed the people behind me nervously. “It’s not what we want...we assure that when you’re called up, we’ll run some tests...on you...and the doctor will help you get what you need.”

I would’ve been ready to fall down and die then and there. I wanted to punch the wall. I wanted to strangle the nurse and demand she bump me up a level. I wanted to do something desperate — whip out a knife and threaten to kill myself. I was going nuts, and the nurse wasn’t helping.

I had to get her to understand.

“Ma’am,” I began, striving to keep my voice measured, “I need to get treated more quickly.” I wasn’t sure whether I’d be able to survive another hour while waiting as pieces of glass circulated around my body. “I know it’s hard for me to describe the pain, but just...just think about the worst pain you can imagine — multiplied by a hundred — ”

The nurse just looked at me sympathetically as I rambled. Tears leaked from my eyes, but she didn’t waver. She didn’t trust me, she didn’t believe that this was life-threatening. I heard someone clear their throat behind me. Turning around, I saw a line of glaring people.

My spirits deflated, I left the nurse, who looked relieved and grateful that I was finally gone and attended to the next person waiting. I collapsed on one of the waiting room chairs.

“Dwayne!”

Amanda strolled over in my direction, her purse bouncing at her side.

“What’s going on?” she asked, concerned.

“I...” My voice came out raspy. “I’ll be admitted soon.”

“Okay.” Amanda focused on me, her eyes narrowed. “Do you know when they’re going to admit you?”

“They said...around 60 minutes.”

Amanda’s eyes widened. “You don’t look like you’ll last another 60 minutes!” she cried. “Can’t they take you in quicker?”

“They do at my other hospital...but these nurses won’t.”

“Why not?”

I thought about it for a second, frowning.

“They...they probably think that I’m a drug addict or something, experiencing withdrawal. You know, it’s painful, but it’s not life-threatening.” I paused. “Not a lot of people know about sickle cell.”

Amanda shook her head and curled her fists.

“This is crazy.” She looked around determinedly. “Okay, let me — let me talk to someone and see if I can change their mind.”

I sagged against my seat and took great, heaving breaths. I wasn’t sure how much she would be able to do, but I was prepared to try anything at this point.

“Okay.”

I watched as Amanda left and went over to one of the ER specialists pacing the waiting room. She pointed at me and pulled out her phone. Moments later, she was showing something to the specialist, who frowned and nodded.

A few minutes later, Amanda returned and sat beside me.

“What did she say?” I asked her hurriedly, hugging my stomach.

“She said she’ll see what she can do.” Amanda pursed her lips. “But I think I was able to convince her to bring you in a little earlier.”

I sighed with relief.

“T — thanks. Thanks a ton.”

As gratitude washed over me, so did an array of other emotions: Guilt. Fear. Helplessness.

I hated depending on others for so many things. My mom. The nurses. My doctor. Friends who were kind enough to help me out, like Ricardo and Amanda.

As I wallowed in my pain and gloomy thoughts, I noticed Amanda staring at me.

“Are you okay?” she asked.

“Yeah,” I lied. “Thanks for having my back.”

Amanda grinned nervously; she looked as though she wanted to give me rest, but also as though she wanted to engage me in conversation.

“You know,” she said in a low voice, her earrings right next to me as she leaned in (my heartbeat quickened even more), “I think this is better than that restaurant. It’s a lot easier to talk.”

I laughed humorlessly. “Well...nothing to eat, though.”

“I can get us snacks from the vending machine,” she offered, a grin on her face.

“Very funny,” I muttered back, though I also found myself grinning. I didn’t mind talking to her. I also found it was helping me relax.

“Speaking of stuff to eat — why do you smell like an orange?”

I laughed, this time for real. “Shut up. I used one of my sister’s perfumes.”

Amanda took my hand and snuggled in even more closely, sending an electric shock inside me. But once the initial surge wore off, I felt warmer. I looked into her brown eyes; she seemed again as though she was wondering whether to stop talking or not.

“Do you want to hear a funny story?” she asked, biting her lip.

As a thousand baseball bats rained blows all over my body, the thought of something — *anything*, to take my mind off the pain — sounded very appealing. I groaned and slumped even further down my seat, and Amanda gripped my hand more tightly.

“Fire away.”

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