

## When Thorns Are the Tips of Trees

by Jason Sanford

*Originally published in Interzone, issue 219, December 2008.*

*Winner of the 2008 Interzone Readers' Poll. Reprinted in Apex Magazine, May 2009*

As I walked the heat-cracked sidewalk in front of Seanna's house, she surprised me by blowing a kiss from her bedroom window — a kiss I knew she'd never actually give. Even though I was mad at her mother for forbidding Seanna from seeing me, I blew a kiss back, only to have her mother evil-eye me from their garden. I ignored the look and kept walking. Seanna's Mom had hated me ever since I'd held her daughter's hand last month. Never mind that Seanna and I had both been wearing gloves, meaning I hadn't technically touched her skin.

When Dad heard of me holding hands, he stayed calm and merely muttered about raging teenage hormones. But to be prudent, the next morning he drove me to the town's pharmacy, where the Doc doubled my weekly dose of inhibitor. "Better safe than stiff," Dad said with a smirk.

But I didn't have time to worry about Seanna or her mom or even my dad's lame sexual innuendos; the sun was setting and it wasn't safe to stay out after dark.

Seanna's was the last maintained house on the block. Just down the street pine trees and kudzu sprawled across abandoned lawns and burned-out homes. Amid all this green lay the ruins of Brad's house. The old swing set we'd played on as kids was tipped over in the corner of the front yard, the reds and blues of its molded polymers faded away and small pines growing through the frame. The clubhouse we built in the oak tree hung half rotten, the tree itself almost buried in a sea of kudzu vines. I sneaked around to the backyard, where the grass looked like prairie and the second story windows — broken by last year's hail storm — still hadn't been replaced.

The only spot the weeds and kudzu and pines hadn't invaded was a well-trimmed circle in the middle of the backyard where a single thorn tree grew.

The lights were on in Brad's house, and I watched his father's silhouette pace around the living room. I figured he was too drunk to notice me, but when I tried sneaking into the yard Brad's old German Sheppard barked and chased me back out. "Sarge?" I whispered. Sarge recognized my voice and padded over, whining as he licked my face. He then walked back to the thorn tree and lay down under its scraggy branches.

I sneaked across the yard and crouched behind the thorn tree. The tree — two meters tall, with silver branches and needles crooking left and right like frozen lightning — was sickly and dangerously thin. When I pulled off my gloves and grabbed a needle, it shattered with a musical chime. Sarge growled from a dusty groove beside the tree trunk, where he obviously spent most of his time.

Being more careful, I pushed my index finger onto another needle. A drop of blood ran into the needle as cold rushed my veins.

"Hello Miles," Brad said, emerging from the fog of too much time alone. "Do I even want to know how long it's been since your last visit?"

"Two months," I said, feeling both guilty and relieved that Brad still seemed so fresh. Too often the memories and personalities of thorns stiffened and decayed if they were left alone for long periods of time.

Brad laughed at my guilt and relief, the same high-pitched cackle he'd had as a kid. Not, of course, that I actually heard him. When talking to thorns, it was best to keep your eyes closed. That way your mind turned the thoughts and feeling to words. With eyes closed, the person might almost be sitting next to you.

Almost.

"So what made you finally visit?" Brad asked.

I started to make up an excuse, but it's pointless to lie to a thorn. Brad knew I hated seeing him in this situation. "Elleen was mad," I confessed. "Wouldn't speak to me unless I checked on you."

Brad smiled. No one really cared for him anymore. His mother moved away last year — wanting to be near the safety of a big city — and his father drank too much and barely got by. "He only talks to me when he's almost comatose. I can taste the alcohol in his blood. Never tells me about his life. Simply jabs his hand over and over on my needles."

For a moment I opened my eyes and glanced at the living room window, where I saw Brad's father drinking a beer. As I shifted, the needle in my finger broke. I pulled the tip out of my skin and found another needle to impale myself on. "You're really brittle," I said.

"The water was cut off a while back. Dad can't pay the bill."

I cursed. I should have checked on him before this, what with the drought we've been having. I told Brad to wait, then grabbed an old bucket and sneaked back to Seanna's house. Seanna's Mom was inside, but had left the sprinkler in her garden running. I filled the bucket and returned to Brad, flooding his roots. Sarge whined and climbed out of his hole; as the water washed in I thought I saw the glint of bones there, but I refused to look close enough to find out.

I made several more trips before Brad had enough water. Even though the sun was setting and I needed to run home, I stabbed my finger again. Brad crept through my recent memories until he found the story Elleen had created for him — a haunting tale of lovers kept from one another by cruel fate. Brad cried in my mind as he listened. As the story ended, Brad whispered thanks, and said to give his love to Elleen.

When I reached home, I wanted to tell Elleen about Brad. However, it was already nighttime and shrieks and perverse giggles rose from the fields behind our house. Not daring to discover what waited in that dark, I rushed inside and locked the door behind me.

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The next day I worked with my dad, tossing bags of mulch and manure off the back of our flatbed truck as the sun climbed hot in the sky. We were landscaping the memorial grove in the rich part of town. Even though it was still morning, the heat swamped me as I sweated through my long-sleeve shirt and gloves. I'd strip them off in a second if we were home. But people in town would freak if I showed skin, and Dad might lose this job. Couldn't risk that with work so hard to come by.

After I finished unloading, my dad patted me on the back — a rare touch, even in his gloves — and told me to work on the trees in this area. He'd drive to the other side of the grove and deal with matters there. I nodded knowingly. Mrs. Blondheim, the fanatical town matriarch whose money maintained this grove, had complained about two new trees from thorn die, who'd

sneaked into the park last week. She wanted them removed. I hated killing thorn trees, so my father always handled that chore.

After Dad drove off, I added mulch around the tree trunks and dragged fresh bags deeper into the grove until I couldn't see anything except the glow of hundreds of silver trunks and branches and thorns. All the trees were at their full growth of two meters. Near the center of the grove, I accidentally brushed against a tree and a thorn stabbed through my shirt. Jackie, a cute-faced nine-year-old who'd turned thorn several decades ago, said hello. The fogginess of her thoughts told me no one had talked to her in years. Not wanting to be rude, I held my bleeding arm against her long enough to say hello back.

"Have you seen my doll anywhere?" she asked. "Mom gave it to me on her last visit."

I didn't know what to say. How do you explain to a child who can't grow up, or even change, that her mother was long dead? That the doll had existed only in her mother's mind and, with her mother gone, there's no way to find it. Because of the thorn connection, for the briefest of moments Jackie understood what I was thinking. "My mother's not dead," she cried, before the built up static of time returned her to the fresh-faced nine-year-old she'd been moments before. "Have you seen my doll?" she asked innocently.

"No," I said gently. "But I'll keep an eye out." I pulled my arm away and wiped off the blood before returning to work.

At lunchtime, I sat in the middle of the grove eating my sandwich. The wind blew the silver trees to the sound of a thousand begging whispers, but I resisted the urge to talk to any of them. I thought about visiting Mom's tree, but decided to wait until I was off work in case Mrs. Blondheim came by. Mom turned thorn when I was nine. Even though we hadn't the money to put her in a fancy grove like this, the thought of Mom growing here had obsessed me. Dad tried to tell me that Mom was dead; that her thorn tree was merely an echo of Mom's soul. But I begged him without stopping until he made a deal with Mrs. Blondheim, trading a cut in pay in return for her taking Mom's tree. At the time I'd been thrilled. Now, I wondered if I'd done the right thing.

I also wondered about the people who'd created the phage which caused all this. A few fanatics like Mrs. Blondheim still praised the gened virus's creators for giving beauty and eternal life to our world. Most, though, cursed them as simple enviro terrorists. Whatever the intention, the phage had removed that most basic component of human culture — touch. Almost 90% of humanity carried the phage, but it only activated if you touched someone with the same phage combination. Since the phage continually changed versions like a madly spinning lock, the odds that touching any one person would turn you thorn were not extremely high. However, a person you could safely touch one day might be untouchable the next.

I thought about Seanna. Despite the treatments my father gave me, I wanted so badly to touch her. To hold her. To kiss her. If we married, we could be tested to find a safe day or two in which to touch. If she bore my child, it would be safe for her to touch the baby as long as she breast fed the child and shared the same phage combinations, but I wouldn't be allowed such tenderness. Maybe someday my child and I could be tested so we'd share a hug like my father and I did after Mom died. But as I constructed my life to come, I shook my head. The people who created this curse deserved the worst hell humanity could imagine.

Maybe that had been their intention.

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I finished my work by four and drove home with Dad, trying not to notice the crystalline dust coating his pants. He hated killing thorns and would probably retire to the living room tonight to watch old movies and drink whiskey.

After dinner, I checked the solar panels on the roof and the batteries in the basement, then reset the motion detectors and fluorescents. Once everything checked okay, and with darkness still an hour away, I figured I had enough time to visit Elleen. I grabbed my shotgun and told Dad I'd be back by sunset.

Elleen grew at the far end of our land, just past the corn and wheat fields. Unlike most thorn trees, her crystalline limbs shone with a faint blue hue. While Elleen and I had been friends since childhood, I'd only truly gotten to know her after she and Brad ran away when they were thirteen. Brad returned nine months later, infected and nearing his end. No one knew where Elleen was until I found her tree growing on our property. She later told me she'd been trying to reach Brad when her guts exploded and she fell to the dirt, screaming and begging for more time.

I sat beneath Elleen's limbs, closed my eyes, and eased my palm onto a thorn. She suddenly appeared beside me, smiling, and leaned over and hugged me. While I knew the forbidden touch existed only in my mind, I still shivered with excitement. I was also amazed at the clarity of Elleen's connection. She never showed the foginess most thorns fell into after a few days alone. Even my father, who refused to talk to thorns — including Mom — said hello to Elleen once, remarking later that she was indeed different. He'd also noticed that a few of Elleen's thorns still appeared to be growing, something most thorn trees stopped doing a few months after their first burst of creation.

"How's Brad?" she asked.

I opened my memories of Brad. Elleen frowned when she saw that Brad's father hadn't been watering him. To survive, thorn trees needed more water than ordinary trees. Since the drought began I'd hauled water to Elleen twice a week.

"It's my fault," I stammered. "I didn't know his father had his water cut off. I'll stop by and water Brad from now on."

Elleen thanked me. "Anything new with Seanna?" she asked.

"She blew a kiss at me yesterday. But her mom's still mad at me for holding her gloved hand."

Elleen laughed. "That'll make Seanna want you even more. Nothing turns a girl on like a bad boy."

I started to question whether Elleen was the best one to give advice about a 'bad boy' since Brad had turned her thorn, but I liked Elleen too much to say that. Of course, since our emotions and thoughts were coursing as one through my veins, she knew what I was thinking almost before I did. She laughed and cocked her head sideways in my mind. "For what it's worth, Mr. Miles Stanton, you're too nice a guy to ever be bad. But it'll still help if Seanna sees you as forbidden fruit. Not that what you feel for her is anything more than base horniness and minor infatuation."

I sighed. It was pointless to argue with her over what I felt, or didn't feel, toward Seanna, because Elleen would simply say she saw my motives with more clarity than I could ever muster. Still, it irritated for Elleen to dismiss so easily my love for Seanna.

Elleen and I then talked about her story and Brad's reaction to it. Back in school, Elleen had been the best writer around, with some of her romances picked up by the larger net zines. She still created stories, but now Brad and I were her entire audience. I'd once tried to write the stories down, but the pictures she crafted in my head refused to match the words I knew.

I asked Elleen if she had any new stories; in response, she sang a beautiful tale of a princess lost in a big city. But halfway through the story, just as the princess was about to find the magic key to take her home, Elleen stopped. "Someone's near us," she whispered in panic.

I tried to wake up, but Elleen's thorn trance was so strong I couldn't. Suddenly, Elleen's trunk vibrated and the thorn in my palm shattered. I fell into the dirt with a start. When I looked up, the sky above was dark except for a few moon-lit clouds scudding by. I jumped up, afraid.

The only people out at night were thorn die.

Elleen's limbs and trunk glowed with the slightest of bioluminescence. I cursed softly, grabbing my shotgun as I wished I'd brought my full-spectrum flashlight. It wouldn't stop determined thorn die, but it might scare them. Being killed rarely scared thorn die; pain usually did.

I edged away from Elleen until I reached the dirt road. The road ran between my father's fields and the scrub forest that'd grown up on the abandoned suburban lands. Perfect place for an ambush. Still, I had no choice. I ran down the road as quickly and quietly as I could.

I saw the porch lights of home, saw my father standing outside looking for me, and I started to relax — until three people stepped from the dark shadows beneath a nearby tree. I turned to run, but more people surrounded me.

I aimed the shotgun at a woman standing in front of me. She was half-naked, her breasts showing the faint glowing streaks of the infection snaking through her body. "Hold me," she moaned seductively before laughing. The man next to her giggled and hugged the woman; he was naked, as were most of the others around me. The phage drove thorn die almost insane with a desire to touch other people. But what made this man stand out were the tattoos of numbers across his chest and arms. Prime numbers and base pairs; quadratic equations and Einstein's famous  $e=mc^2$ . The tattoo's dyes had attracted the phage infection so the numbers glowed faintly as he moved.

I had never seen this many thorn die at once, and I aimed the shotgun from one to the next. If I shot one, the others would be on me before I could pump another shell into the chamber. One of the thorn die reached for me, but the tattooed number man pulled him back.

"My apology," the number man said. "The phage screams at us during end stage, especially around uninfected like you."

I nodded in false sympathy. "I understand. If you'll just get out of my way . . ."

The group tightened around me. "First, I'm curious about the thorn tree you were talking to a few moments ago," the man said.

"She's a friend. I take care of her."

That obviously wasn't what the numbered man wanted to know. But before he could be more specific, the half-naked woman beside him jumped at me. I fired the shotgun at her chest, seeing an afterimage of blood and glowing tissue as the numbered man screamed and tried in vain to stop the other thorn die from attacking me. I knocked one thorn die away with the gun's butt, dodged another and started to run when someone grabbed my right leg. I stumbled to the ground, trying to pump the next round into the chamber, but the thorn die were almost on me.

Suddenly a shotgun blast rent the air, then another, then a third. I rolled over to find my father shooting the thorn die. I grabbed my own shotgun and crawled to him. By the time I'd pumped in a new shell, the remaining thorn die were gone, my last glimpse being of the number man as he bolted through the darkness. The shot ones screamed on the ground as their injured bodies raced to take root before death.

"Come on," Dad yelled as he grabbed my arm and dragged me to the house. "There're too many of them."

We ran as fast as we could, still hearing the yelling and screaming even after we'd bolted the front door. Once my father had made sure the thorn die weren't attacking the house, he grabbed my face in his ungloved hands and asked if I was okay. "Did they touch you? Did their blood splatter on you?"

I shook my head, shocked at my father touching me for only the second time in my life. He asked again if they'd touched me, but all I could think about was how warm his flesh felt on mine. I tried to remember if any of the thorn die had touched me. The one who'd grabbed me had only gotten a hold of my pants and boots. And I couldn't see any of their blood on me. But maybe someone had touched me. I couldn't be sure.

Dad hugged me tightly, and mumbled a prayer as he picked up his shotgun. "I'll stand first watch," he said.

Outside, the screaming continued as the wounded thorn die rooted their damned bodies to the ground.

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The sun rose silently, the wounded thorn die having truly died as the phage rebuilt their bodies into silicon and cellulous. Now that the sun was up, the thorn seedlings would grow quickly, reach their full height within a month or two as their bodies and the sunlight were absorbed by a matrix a hundred times more efficient than a leafy plant's chlorophyll. As I walked around our house, I wondered where the other thorn die holed up. Once you were infected with an active phage, exposure to the sun sped up the painful change, which was why thorn die avoided sunlight and houses equipped with full-spectrum spotlights.

Dad was hung-over from drinking too much last night. He also felt guilty about being too drunk to realize I hadn't come back by dark, and worried that I'd gotten an active phage from either the thorn die or his own touch. He opened our safe and took out all the money we'd saved.

We drove downtown to the pharmacy, where Dad explained what had happened. "You need to tell the sheriff about this," the Doc said sympathetically as she took the money from Dad's gloved hand and counted it. I knew we didn't have enough for a single test, let alone two. But to my surprise the Doc handed back some of the money and told me to step over for my blood sample. Dad wasn't getting a test, even though he'd touched me. I protested, but the Doc whispered for me to shut up and act like a man. "Odds are, you'll have the same results," she said.

The test took four hours to run, so Dad and I walked down to the sheriff's office. Sheriff Alice Koffee said she'd heard reports of several large thorn die groups moving through the area. "Been bulletins about this all over the security nets the last few months," she said. "Groups of thorn die move through an area and attack any memorial groves they find. Evidently they're undergoing some revival-like movement which preaches that memorial groves are sinful, but it's difficult to discover specifics on what they're up to."

The sheriff suggested we move closer to town until this passed, but Dad said we'd be fine. We drove uptown and landscaped the memorial grove until noon, then drove back to the pharmacy. I tried to stay calm while we sat and waited for the Doc, but my guts clenched and I could barely breathe. When she told me I was fine, my body shook so hard Dad had to help me stand back up.

Figuring I needed some time alone, Dad said he'd finish landscaping the grove. I drove over to Seanna's house, wanting to talk to someone, but her mother eyed me suspiciously and said she'd gone shopping. I then drove home. I saw the thorn die bodies near the fields. They looked like shrunken mummies, each desiccated body centered on a half-meter silver seedling reaching for the sun.

Still needing to talk, I walked over to Elleen, but words were worthless for what I found. Elleen's trunk was severed, almost all her limbs and thorns destroyed. A single limb remained, attached to a bare sliver of trunk and roots half-dug out of the ground.

Crouching beside her, I gingerly pressed a finger to one of her remaining thorns. She appeared in my mind — hazy, delirious, but alive. At first she couldn't remember who I was, but as she accessed the memories in her remaining branch she smiled. She said the thorn die had attacked her last night; that they'd torn her apart piece by piece as they giggled and impaled themselves on her needles.

I ran home and returned with my work tools. I carefully dug up Elleen's roots, the shovel cracking through her sun bleached bones. I then wrapped her in a wet burlap sack and carried her to the greenhouse behind our house.

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I fussed over Elleen for the rest of the day, and Dad joined me when he arrived home. We placed her under the greenhouse grow lights and soaked her in nutrient rich soil. Dad figured it was touch and go, but said she might pull through.

"It's weird, the thorn die doing that," he said later, as we sat on the porch watching the sun set. I held my shotgun, while an automatic rifle I'd never seen before rested on Dad's lap. "And I don't understand why they're attacking the memorial groves. I mean, they'll all be trees in a few weeks or months. Why attack their own?"

Dad said that as he'd left town, the sheriff and fire departments had called up their auxiliary officers and were preparing for the worst. The National Guard was also out.

But Dad and I didn't get hit that night. On the horizon, we saw fires in the direction of town and heard a number of gunshots. If the phones and general nets had still been up, we'd have known what was happening. But they'd been gone for the last decade in this part of the state and the security nets were so overloaded we couldn't log on, so we sat on the porch all night long, slapping mosquitoes and waiting for first light.

The next morning the smell of smoke strangled the air as Dad and I drove to town. We first rode through the outlying subdivisions so I could check on Seanna. We found hers and Brad's houses burned to the ground. There was no sign of Seanna and her family, but one of their neighbors said Seanna and her mother had been hurt and were in the hospital downtown. When I walked next door to Brad's house, I found his father's charred body in what had been the living room. Brad's old German Sheppard, Sarge, lay dead near the body, as if he'd tried to protect his master.

Out back, Brad's tree looked like it had survived. But when I touched a thorn to give Brad the bad news, the crystalline structure shattered to shards. Dad shook his head and said the fire's heat must have killed Brad, too.

While I cried, Dad patted me on the shoulder with his gloved hand. I understood that even with Brad's death it wasn't worth us risking another touch.

We buried Brad's father and Sarge beside Brad and I said a few words, telling Brad how much I'd miss him, how much Elleen loved him. We then drove to town. Burned barricades blocked most of the roads, with dozens of thorn die bodies lying around, some trying to root into the asphalt of Main Street. The National Guard still manned the barricades. A weary sergeant waved us through. We stopped at the hospital to check on Seanna and her mother, but the docs and nurses were overwhelmed with the injured and refused to let us in.

Unable to help, Dad and I drove on to the memorial grove. Turned out the thorn die attack on the barricades and houses, no matter how bloody, had only been a diversion. A larger group attacked the town's memorial groves, smashing machetes and axes through the silver trees. Two groves in the poorer, outlying parts of town were totally destroyed, every tree missing branches and thorns, while the rich memorial grove Dad and I worked for had been partially damaged. We found the Sheriff near several of the grove's oldest thorn trees, all of whom were Blondheim relatives. The old trees had half their branches hacked off, and several were burned.

"Hundreds of them attacked the grove," Sheriff Koffee said, "led by some thorn die named Chance with glowing numbers on his skin. Security nets say he used to be a math professor before the last universities shut down. Anyway, we beat them off before they torched the whole grove. But that Blondheim woman is still screaming at me for not doing more."

At the mention of the thorn die with the tattoos, I told Sheriff Koffee that he'd also attacked me, but she was distracted by the return of Mrs. Blondheim, who begged my Dad to save her trees. We inspected them. Several were obviously goners, while a handful might be saved with quick action. I started to tell Mrs. Blondheim that no matter what we did the trees had already lost any memories stored in their severed branches, but a stern look from Dad made me hush. I looked around the now damaged grove, located Mom's tree, and walked over to talk with her while Dad and the Sheriff hashed things out with Mrs. Blondheim.

Mom was happy to see me, but then she was always happy now that she was a thorn. I told her about Elleen and the grove being attacked, and how Brad and his father were dead while Seanna was in the hospital. At that point I broke down and cried. Mom held me tight and told me everything would be all right. She talked as if I was a child suffering from a terrible nightmare.

However, once I finished crying Mom quickly grew confused at my pain — confusion which meant she'd already forgotten everything I'd told her. She again asked how Brad and Elleen were doing. I stared into her deep-beautiful blue eyes, and saw myself reflected back as the child she'd known before she died. To Mom, I'd never grow up because she couldn't change, her memories and soul burned hard and static into the tree's crystal structure. No matter what happened in life, Mom would forever be the same person as when she died.

Even though I hated to lie, I couldn't stomach telling her about Brad and Elleen again.

"They're fine," I said, praying she didn't sense my dishonesty.

"That's good," she said with a final hug. "Every one needs best friends."

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Dad and I spent the rest of the day shoring up injured trees in the grove. By lunchtime, a large crowd of townsfolk had gathered, with people checking on the trees of relatives and friends or trying to help me and Dad. A National Guard Captain stopped by at one point and almost started a riot when he suggested people pull back to the center of town tonight — where it'd be easier to protect against the next attack — instead of defending the memorial grove. Several

townsfolk actually pulled guns on the Captain until Sheriff Koffee calmed things down by saying we'd defend everyone in town, including the thorn trees.

When dusk was a few hours away, Dad loaded our tools in the truck and said we needed to go. Sheriff Koffee urged us to stay in town, offering to let us room in her house. Dad thanked her but said we'd be fine at home.

As we drove away we passed neighbors and friends preparing to defend the town and the memorial grove. I felt so ashamed at leaving that I sank down in my seat to hide. I asked Dad why we couldn't stay in town. I wanted to defend Seanna, who was still unconscious in the hospital. I wanted to defend Mom's tree. I wanted to stand with my neighbors. But Dad said sometimes it was best not to do what everyone else did and left it at that.

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Over the next few days the thorn die attacked the town two more times. Dad and I took turns guarding our house at night. In the morning we drove to town and worked at saving the trees. Sheriff Koffee said the security nets reported attacks on memorial groves in several nearby towns and cities. Once the thorn die had destroyed all the groves in a town, they left the remaining townsfolk alone.

On the third day I finally was allowed to see Seanna, who was recovering from a nasty hit she'd taken to the head. For once her mother didn't shoo me away. I blew a kiss at Seanna and told her to get well. Seanna smiled from her hospital bed and reached her bare hand out for me, missing my arm by a hair. Her mother giggled nervously and told me Seanna was still delirious. "She'll be all right," she muttered over and over. "She'll be all right."

When Dad and I returned home, I ran to the greenhouse to check on Elleen. She looked much better, with a number of needles budding from her trunk and remaining limb. I carefully pricked my palm.

"She's infected," Elleen said with a frown.

"What?"

"Seanna. She's infected. That's why she tried to grab you."

I nodded. Obviously, Elleen knew more than I did about how newly infected people acted. I tried to feel sorry for both Seanna and myself at the news, but after all the death and pain of the last few days I couldn't move past a weary numbness. "How are you feeling?" I asked.

"Better. It's funny how all that hacking and cutting didn't hurt. Just left me confused for a bit."

I smiled. I'd been helping Elleen remember certain things like Brad, giving her some of my own memories to replace what she was missing. Each new memory expanded the buds on her body. Elleen and I also talked about Brad's burial. She was trying to create words for his tombstone. I told her I'd carve the stone once all the craziness calmed down.

Before I left, Elleen mentioned that she'd spoken with Chance, the numbered thorn die who'd hacked her to pieces. "He was extremely sad at hurting me, but said one day I'd understand. He also asked for your forgiveness. I was a little confused by then, but I'm pretty sure he asked for your forgiveness, not mine, even though I was the one being torn apart."

I asked Elleen why Chance hadn't finished the job and killed her. Elleen didn't know. She then told me to be careful. "They're determined," she said. "Nothing scarier in the world than a determined person."

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That night Dad and I sat on the porch. There was only silence from town, the National Guard's full spectrum spotlights casting a hazy glow above the pines and oaks on the horizon. Dad was sitting quietly, counting his ammunition, when we heard a giggle from the darkness before us.

"You don't want to do this," Dad yelled. "We ain't in your way."

"I agree," a voice called back, "and I don't want to do this. But I do want to talk. Will you kill your spotlights?"

I started to say hell no, but Dad waved for me to go do it. I walked in the house and threw the switch for the front spotlights. However, I left the lights shining in the greenhouse out back. I didn't want these bastards to get near Elleen. I expected Dad to be mad at me for that, but he merely nodded in agreement when I returned to the porch.

As our eyes grew used to the dark, we saw dozens of faintly glowing thorn die standing in the treeline. One thorn die walked forward. He stopped a few meters from the porch, glowing numbers covering his skin.

"You're Chance, I assume," Dad said. "You should know I'm pretty mad at what you did to Elleen, and almost did to my son."

Chance shrugged. "I tried to stop them from attacking your son, but they wouldn't listen. Anyway, I don't want to talk about all that. I'm wondering why you two aren't in town."

"Not our fight," Dad said.

"But I've seen you working in the memorial grove."

Dad thought for a moment. "I'm a gardener. I always have been. Helping the trees helps people feel better about those they've lost. But that doesn't mean I'm going to die defending the damn things."

Chance smiled and clapped his hands. "Exactly. That's what people miss. Those trees are just an unchanging echo of the person they used to be. Many of us thorn die believe the worst hell we'll ever experience is being trapped for hundreds of years as we are at the moment we die. Kept like an old photo or video. Only taken out when someone wants to revisit old memories."

Dad didn't say anything, but I could see he agreed with Chance's words.

"What about your wife's tree?" Chance asked.

Dad bristled at the mention of Mom and shifted the rifle in his hand. "My wife is dead, Mr. Chance. I don't appreciate you dredging up our private affairs."

Chance giggled nervously. "Quite right," he said. "That's exactly right. We won't be bothering you or your son, assuming you stay out of the fight."

"We'll still be working in the grove each day," Dad said.

"I wouldn't expect anything less."

Chance thanked Dad and me, then turned and walked back to the treeline. He was already there when I jumped off the porch and ran after him. "Wait," I yelled. "Why didn't you kill Elleen?"

Chance turned. In the dark, I couldn't see his face, only the glowing numbers across his arms and chest. "Because we weren't trying to kill her," he said. "We were helping her. None of us are the person we were yesterday — we're only truly alive as long as we keep growing. And sometimes to grow you must lose something. You, of all people, should understand that."

I protested, wanting more explanation, but several of the thorn die in the darkness around me giggled in warning. I ran back to the porch as Chance laughed.

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In the morning I talked with Elleen, telling her everything that Chance had said. Elleen seemed to have improved even more overnight, with dozens of needle buds sprouting and several of her larger needles thickening into small branches. I'd never seen a thorn tree bounce back so quickly from near death, and Elleen blushed at my compliment.

"Chance might be right," Elleen said. "I feel so alive right now. Like anything is possible."

However, whatever Dad and I were doing right for Elleen wasn't working for the trees in the memorial grove. Even though the thorn die hadn't attacked overnight, several more trees had succumbed to shock from previous injuries. Dad and I worked the best we could, splicing busted limbs and applying nutrients to gashes and cuts, but he told me few of the injured trees would survive. It was almost as if they lacked the will to live. I felt sorry for the dying trees and, when I realized one was the young girl who'd said hello to me the other day, I touched her needles. But her thoughts were so confused and diffuse that there was little consciousness left to comfort.

I spent lunchtime with Mom, telling her how well Elleen was doing, and about what Chance had told us. Of course, Mom forgot my words shortly after I'd spoken them. I wondered if I should do as Chance had and cut off some of Mom's branches and thorns. Force her to grow new memories and life. But I was too weak; I couldn't do that to Mom. As she hugged me farewell and said to watch after Dad, someone yanked me off her thorn. I fell backwards and stared up into the angry face of Mrs. Blondheim.

"Get back to work," she yelled. "How dare you waste time when my trees are dying."

I tried telling her the injured trees were going to die no matter what we did because they'd stopped living years ago, but my backtalk only made Mrs. Blondheim angrier. She hit me with her cane over and over, telling me to go to work, until Dad and the Sheriff walked up. Dad calmly grabbed Mrs. Blondheim's cane in mid-air as it was about to strike me again.

"How dare you," Mrs. Blondheim spat at Dad.

Dad yanked the cane away from her and handed it to the Sheriff. "We're done here," he said. "Sheriff, if you need us we'll be at our house."

Mrs. Blondheim stared in horror at Dad. "You will get back to work, or I'll have your wife's tree dug up. I'll hack it down like those scum did to the other trees."

Dad glanced at Mom's tree, and nodded sadly. "My wife died a long time ago," he said. "There's nothing you can do to hurt her."

He then led me away. Mrs. Blondheim screamed at Sheriff Koffee to arrest us, but the Sheriff ignored her.

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Two days later, the thorn die attacked the grove a final time. A few townsfolk still fought back, but the Sheriff and the National Guard kept their people away from the grove, instead making their stand between the thorn die and the living part of town. As the Sheriff told us later, there comes a point when you have to decide what's worth dying for — and for Alice Koffee, the dead weren't worth any more dying.

The next morning Dad and I walked through the splinters of the memorial grove. We found Mom's tree missing most of her branches. I tried talking to Mom, to see if she was still inside, fighting for life like Elleen had done, but all I felt was silence. We dug up her bones from

beneath the roots and buried her alongside Brad and his father. Dad said Brad's old backyard would make a good burial ground. I agreed and drove back to our farm, where I found Elleen's bones. I carried them back and buried her next to Brad.

I then drove to the hospital. Seanna was in a darkened isolation room. Her mom was talking to Mrs. Blondheim about planting Seanna in the rebuilt memorial grove. I tried to convince Seanna's mom not to do that — to instead let Seanna out of isolation to enjoy her remaining months of life. "And when she's dead, don't let her stay the same. Cut off her branches. Force her to grow and change. She'll thank you for it one day."

But Seanna's mom and Mrs. Blondheim glared in horror at my suggestion, as if I'd told them to murder Seanna in her sleep. I started to argue, but realized there were people you didn't waste time arguing with. So I stood beside the isolation door and told Seanna that I loved her, then walked away.

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I finished carving the tombstones the following spring, taking extra care with the letters of Elleen's tribute to each person. Because she refused to create words for her own bones, I simply wrote the words "A friend" on her burial marker. I could tell she was pleased with that.

Even though the thorn die continued to attack memorial groves across the region, none ever again bothered Elleen. When she was big enough, I planted her beside our porch so I could talk with her every day. Elleen once again glowed a faint blue luminescence. And even though I hated the idea of doing so, I promised Elleen that if she ever became stuck in who and what she was, I'd cut off some of her branches and thorns. "Just so you can grow again," I told her with a smile.

But I didn't have to worry about that for now. As I sat with my palm on Elleen's needles, we shivered to the faint chill wind, listened to the crickets humming, and watched the stars washing the sky. Feeling bold, I asked Elleen what made her want to live on and on. She laughed and hugged me, then kissed me on the lips of my mind until I forgot all about my question and simply kissed her back.

END