

Captain Henry Pierce shivered as he inched closer to the small fire. He sighed and grabbed another stick from the small pile beside him and tossed it into the flames. It coughed up embers as the new branch crushed the ones below. The sun was beginning to set below the dunes and the temperature was dropping fast. Henry removed his helmet and ran his fingers through his mangled mess of brown hair. He needed one last look before turning in for the night.

Henry opened his left breast pocket, pulling out a photo with the date 5/9/2014 scribbled on the back. He flipped the photo; a big smile stretched from ear to ear.

“My darling Elizabeth,” he whispered. She gazed up at him with gentle green eyes. Her brown hair flowed down to her shoulders. Her fair bronze complexion was highlighted by her beautiful red dress. It was the same dress she wore on their first anniversary. He could still feel his sore feet from their dancing marathon that night. Henry wiped tears from his eyes and carefully placed the photo back into his pocket.

The sun had now set, revealing the billions of dazzling stars above him. Henry reached behind him and snagged his backpack. He unzipped the front pocket and pulled out his journal. He wrote in it every day to maintain his sanity, and there was no better way than writing to his wife.

Henry rummaged through his pockets until he found a pen and flipped to an empty page near the back. There were only three empty pages remaining. Henry voraciously shook his pen and began to write.

*I can't believe it's been two years since I last saw you. Two years since we last cuddled beside the fire, went for a morning jog, and binged our favorite shows. Two years since I was deployed for this secret mission that will perhaps be the death of me, but, not a day goes by I don't miss you darling.*

*I've been wandering this desert for four months now, but it feels like an eternity. The sand runs for miles in every direction and no matter how far I trek each day, the number of dunes never seems to dwindle. If I'd known this hellscape awaited me and the enemy wasn't bearing down on me, I would've stayed near the wreckage. Thankfully they gave up months ago, but I can't risk going back. All I can do is continue forward and hope I come across good fortune.*

Henry lifted the pen from the paper and shook his head. His therapist always told him to discuss his PTSD with people, as a way of healing. This was his way to heal. Henry grimaced and continued writing.

*I'm sorry. I can't lie to you dear. I had to leave was because of my brothers. I'm the only survivor of the crash, and after burying them, their faces haunted me. I stayed there for two nights and barely slept, and whenever I did sleep, I could only dream of their husbands and wives waiting at the door for their spouse to come home. Then I think of you. I promised I would never put you in that position and whenever I think of someone coming to our home and presenting you with our nation's flag...*

Two teardrops hit the parchment. Henry wiped his eyes and exhaled slowly.

*The thought of that makes my heart ache, but with every passing day, I get closer to you, and when I get home, we'll return to that beautiful island where we became engaged.*

*I can still remember that grueling hike you took me on. My legs have never hurt so much, and I was so out of breath, I wasn't sure if I'd be able to get the words out! But after reaching the peak and witnessing sunset glistening across the ocean, I couldn't think of a better nor place. The combination of the ocean breeze, smell of the grass and the look of awe on your face, released dozens of caged butterflies in my stomach.*

Henry's stomach grumbled loudly. It had been a week since he last ate, and he would need to get up early to hunt before the sun rose, but he didn't want to stop writing. Not yet.

*I'm sorry I'm not there for you darling. I've missed so much time that I'll never get back. Our five-year anniversary, your graduation ceremony for your masters' and most importantly: the birth of our daughter. I'll never forgive myself for that, but I can't wait to rock her to sleep and watch her play with all her toys.*

*I know you think I'm crazy for not wanting you to send a photo of her or tell me her name, but I want to experience all of that with you for the first time. I want to be there when she rides a bike, hits her first single and watch her face as she see her first fireworks show from my shoulders at Disneyland. I want us to be there together for everything.*

Henry looked up from his journal. The fire was dying; its light fading. He couldn't afford to waste anymore sticks. He rubbed his eye and returned his pen to the paper.

*Okay darling, I need to get some sleep. Tomorrow is a new day and a new chance to get out of this desert. I love you with all my heart Elizabeth. You are my forever, and forever you will be. Kiss our little girl for me. -Henry*

Henry closed his journal and stuffed it back into his bag. He settled into the sand, gazing at the stars with a hopeful smile.

"I'll be home soon Elizabeth," Henry sighed, taking his final breath. "I promise."