

The Forage

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A small group of village children are sent out for an important forage. With little told about their journey, they must stay under the shield of darkness to complete the task.

The children reach the edge of the meadow and fade into the shadows beneath an almost dark sky. Single file, a girl stops at the soaring dense ironwood trees—a massive swaying wall in front of her. She squints to see beyond the trees and takes a step forward. The tree's needles wispy and soft, her small body slips between the trunks and branches. The rest follow her, the view behind them obscured by the darkness that immediately engulfs them.

“How far we supposed to go?” asks a boy. “*Hushhh*. We're far from home. Something'll hear us now, sure enough, just keep looking” whispers another child.

The girl pays no attention to the fuss behind her. She walks horizontally across the thicket of branches. There are no signs of what they are looking for. No markers, no landmarks, no lanterns. They've all been told very little about specifics, except that they are old enough now to forage.

The children reach two long and shiny parallel steps sitting on the dirt. Unlike anything they'd ever seen, they drop to their hands and knees and follow the decades-old mining rails to the big box they've been told they must find. The five-by-five-foot box, an old mining gondola cart, is just tall enough to conceal the tops of their heads when standing upright inside the cart.

“Let's push it up the hill now,” the girl says, her eyes shifting back to the trees.

“I see no lights...how bright do you think they could be? another boy whispers.

“Like the moon or a big fire? Maybe we should wait for one to come on so...” another child responds when he is cut off by what sounds like a giant axe hitting something that is not wood.

The sharp thud absorbs into the hillside, and a steady stream of light can be seen reaching into the night sky halfway up the hill. The faint light illuminates the side of the gondola car just enough to see faded black letters on the side of the box that reads, “U.S. MILITARY”.

As quickly as the first light turned on without warning, another sound blows and they see another searchlight beam reach the clouds. With wide-eye glances, their breathing becomes heavy, accelerating in unison. They move abruptly and begin to push the rail cart up the hill.

None of them had known they were going foraging until earlier that day. Tears were no good. Each one knew their turn would come. Most kids came back largely unharmed, a few scratches, maybe a torn shirt or lost cap. The girl could only remember once in her eight years that another girl had not returned. Another year, a neighbor had gone and come back, but the water came late that season, crops got a late start, and the village was hungry much of that cold season.

The children push the gondola nearly half of the way up the hill when several searchlights came on in a quick succession. *Whack. Whack. Whack*. One boy stops to see the sky lit up in a crisscross pattern of spectacular beams.

“But what are they *for*?” he wonders aloud, letting go of the cart.

As he let go, the cart begins to move backwards. The girl gasps as she tries to push back up on the cart, overcompensating for the lack of help. The front of her dress catches under a gondola wheel, overpowering her. All four children shriek louder than they should. She would be crushed if they did not move the cart back up.

They try to regain composure but lack the momentum to free her without having her let go of the cart herself. In the brief seconds of their struggle, they realize they need her to complete their tasks altogether. Four children are always sent out to forage. Four are needed to push the cart up. One child per corner of the gondola on the ride down. Never more, never less. The year that girl had not come back home, she must have gone missing at the top of the hill, but the others had still completed the forage. The panic from the grim possibilities sets in, she cannot die yet.

With the dress pulling her down on her left side, she inches closer to the ground and whispers, “On three, push as hard as you can.” She takes a few breaths and musters the strength to start the count when it happens again. *Whack. Whack. Whack.* More searchlights turn on somewhere above them.

Fading, she rests her head against the rusted metal cart. A voice that is not hers says, “One. Two. Three.” She winces and pushes as hard as she can using the collapsed side of her body, falling to the ground as the gondola wheel releases her dress and continues to rise uphill leaving her behind.

Someone is pushing the cart with the boys. Confused and tired, she gets up and catches up to them so she can see who it is, but the brightness of the searchlights around her makes it hard for her eyes to adjust. They are moving quickly; she cannot see clearly.

They reach the top of the hill and push the cart to a landing. The person disappears into a small tin shelter. A woman comes out with briefcase-sized boxes marked with a big red cross on two sides. She hands one to each child and tells them to get in the gondola.

The children do as they are told. This is what they have come for. The last thing they were told to do was to turn a small wheel protruding from the ground on the side of the shelter. Marked “IRRIGATION,” the girl turned it as fast as she could. Just as more searchlights moved across the sky from the valleys beyond the hill, the others pushed the gondola to the edge. The girl jumped back in before they all rode down and disappeared into the darkness behind the ironwoods.