

## A Marathon Below

A man lit his fields on fire in the middle of harvest. The story ran for three days in the local paper, buried under weather charts and ads for tractor tires. No arrest. No motive. Just a charred farmhouse, a half-melted scarecrow, and a photo of ash drifting down like snow.

Somewhere nearby, a runner crests a hill.

He doesn't know the farmer, not really. He saw his name once, in the anatomy lab, on a toe tag.

He is a medical student. Or he was. Or maybe he's just a man now, shirt clinging to his back with sweat, legs churning against the cracked dirt of the Sanitas Valley Marathon.

The air is thin, dry, glowing with heat and something else. He tells himself this is just another long run. He always runs when it gets too much, when studying turns to spiraling, when his skin itches from stillness.

He likes night runs most. Sometimes, he loses hours. Sometimes, he finds himself back at the dissection table with his scalpel already buried in muscle, slicing through silence.

The trail dips down into the valley now. The mountains loom in every direction, distant and unmoving. No matter how far he runs, they stay the same—gray, towering, silent. Whether he runs toward them or away, it doesn't matter. They do not change.

He keeps running.

People pass him. First, his classmates. They nod, wave, vanish over the next hill. Then professors. His anatomy instructor, smiling too wide. A woman from the hospital. His girlfriend—no, ex—wearing the same green dress she was buried in. Her lips blue, her eyes half-lidded, as though waiting to speak.

He stops.

She passes.

He starts again.

The ground shifts underfoot. The trail climbs, dips, bends back on itself. He's not sure how long it's been—an hour, a day, a year.

The first man who speaks to him is barefoot. Mud clings to his face like a mask.

"What are you running from?" the man asks.

"I'm not."

"Then why are you sweating like that?"

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The man laughs and disappears.

Next comes a woman in a business suit, holding a clipboard. “You’ll never reach the end,” she says. “But you can own it.”

“Own what?”

“The course. The valley. The illusion.” She flips the page. “Name?”

He walks past her. She doesn’t follow.

Each person that meets him along the way feels like a mirror. One hoards water, won’t share it. Another runs with bags of coins tied to his back. A third licks her lips every time she sees someone stumble.

He begins to understand. Lust, greed, envy, pride—the sins line up like checkpoints.

He wonders which ones are his.

The valley never ends. The corpses begin.

They stand on the side of the trail, still as stone. Some are people he knew. A classmate who failed out. A woman who coded in the ER. His ex again, her eyes weeping something darker than tears.

They don’t speak. They only watch.

When he runs, they watch.

When he stops, they lean forward slightly, as if expecting him to say something. To confess.

He runs harder.

Eventually, the sun sets, but the valley glows red anyway. The mountains burn on the horizon.

Somewhere inside him, he knows this is not a marathon. There is no finish line. There never was.

It is a reckoning.

He collapses near a tree, though he does not remember any trees being here before. His knees bleed into the cracked dirt.

From the shadows, a voice.

“What are you running from?”

He looks up.

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It is the farmer. The one who burned everything. His mouth is full of ash. His hands are blackened, but his eyes are clear.

“Do you know now?” the farmer asks. “Or do you need to keep running?”

The medical student doesn’t answer.

He breathes.

The corpses wait. The mountains burn. The valley listens.

And he runs again.