

AN UNWANTED GIFT FROM HOME

Mason's eyes flickered open to the sound of a trumpet, its voice reverberating throughout the narrow corridors of the ship. He could faintly hear the Lieutenant screaming at the marines to wake up. Mason sat up and groggily stumbled across his cabin to the basin. He doused his face with cold water to wake him up and glared at the mirror.

He saw what he always saw. A tall, skinny, 23 year old man with a black crew cut and chocolate brown eyes. Mason scratched his hair and sighed, but then glanced at the calendar. 11th February, 1942.

Today is the day! thought Mason, becoming jumpy with excitement.

I'm almost in New Zealand! He then heard a deep banging noise.

"Thump!", then another one.

"Thump!" Mason then realised someone was knocking on the cabin door. He opened it to find a red faced soldier with a stack of papers in hand. The marine handed one to Mason and then spoke.

"Ship. Docking. One hour. New Zealand. Home Guard, New Zealander partner. You." Panted the messenger, who was obviously in a hurry. Mason thanked him, understanding his message then closed the door and sat on his bed.

Inside the envelope there was a brochure, a piece of paper and a picture of a young man.

"Jason Middleton." Mason read from the paper. "That must be the guy in the photo." thought Mason.

The sun shined on Mason's face as he descended the ramp and onto New Zealand soil. He and his comrades started marching through the streets of Wellington, stopping only to hand candy to children. They loved it.

About an hour later the Marines were at a military camp by Wellington being paired up with NZ Home Guard soldiers. "Joshua Albert, you're with Patrick Mays." Announced the NZ Prime Minister, Peter Fraser. "Brandon Scott, you are with Benjamin Fern. Mason Turner, you are with Jason Middleton."

Mason trudged over to a tall blonde man of maybe 21 with brown eyes.

He shook Jason's hand and greeted him. "You must be Mason?" Inquired Jason.

"Yeah," confirmed Mason. "New Zealand is a really nice place, you know." He told the Kiwi

"I kno- what is this?" Jason spied a few blisters under Mason's cuff, blaring red and white like snow bathed in blood on a battlefield. Fear swelled up inside of him. He was told of the risk of smallpox coming from the United States to NZ.

"What do you mea- oh no." gasped Mason while a daunt expression of pure terror hung over his face.

"I'm so sorry. I didn't realise that I got it," Mason apologized, nodding to the rash. He then became dizzy from the thought of what happened to him, tears of fear began to gather at the brink of his eyes.

"No. It can't be!" Mason knew that this meant the end of his military career, let alone his life, probably.

"Jason, I know that this is a lot to ask of you, but will you help me hide my blisters?" Mason requested, aware of the potential danger he was putting this man at risk to. But to his surprise, Jason solemnly nodded and with a grim expression, he spoke.

"Yes. I understand that you don't want to leave. The military is your life, so you don't want to go home due to your sickness. So yes, I will help you."

Mason looked shocked. How was this man he just met able to read his mind like that? When Mason inquired this question, he got a surprising response.

"Because I can relate to you. I have flat feet, but I joined the army anyway. I got shot in the arm, so when I went to get treated, the nurse found I had flat feet and sent me here. I left my life and I returned a year later to this place which is completely different. Dad in prison, Mum on some farm and my love has fallen for another. I will help you Mason, but if we are discovered, I will go back to Uncle Sam with you, so I can start a new life. A better one than this one at least. Deal?"

"Deal" Mason answered.

"Then come to my house with me after this ceremony and you'll stay there with me, like the other Marines are doing with *their* partners. I'll treat you the best I can." Jason stated.

"Thank you... friend." Mason said slowly.

"C'mon, cheer up. Here we call each other 'mate', nothing so formal as 'friend'." Jason joked, then grinned. They'll get caught if they're always so sad and quiet. They had to be cheerful to stay on top of this dilemma and not be depressed.

Jason's house was in the outskirts of Wellington, which was far enough away from other homes so no one can eavesdrop on the two men.

Mason was lying in a spare bed, shivering and groaning, sweating with fever. Jason was pressing a cold cloth to his forehead.

"This is even worse than I thought." Grimaced Jason.

"I-I think I should turn you in," Jason confessed.

"This," he gestured to the rash, "is beyond my ability. I can handle the fever, but I have no idea what to do about the blisters. New Zealand doesn't have any medication for this and if I asked a Marine they'd know what has happened."

"Fine. But just one more day. I want to see the city before I'm put in quarantine." Mason weakly requested.

"How could such a beautiful place be existent?" Wondered Mason, gazing across the harbour. "It's amazing, isn't it? And just a few miles south over there is the South Island. It has Christchurch and Dunedin, which are the main cities there. North of here is Auckland, which is the biggest city in New Zealand." Jason informed, pointing out the national ports.

He then started wildly coughing. When it subsided, he was surprised by someone behind them yelling. "Hey! Private! What are you doing gawking at the water?" Yelled a hoarse, raspy voice. Mason turned to face it only to gasp at the sight of Lieutenant Surge. "Get over to the hall you maggot! I've been looking for you for almost an hour!" Bellowed Surge. The bulky man grabbed at Mason's wrist and pulled him into the city.

"You two needed to attend the public ceremony! I had to slip away to find you so I wouldn't be embarrassed when a space was missing in the rank lines!" Howled Surge, who then glared at Mason accusingly, but his gaze wandered to his opposite hand, which Mason was doing a horrible job trying to subtly hide it.

It was covered in red and white spots. Lieutenant Surge gasped and dropped the private's arm, shocked to see the painfully familiar sight of the disease.

Surge softened his expression. "Come with me to the ship." He sharply told the men. "NOW!" He yelled when they hesitated to obey.

Mason and Jason hurriedly followed the Lieutenant to the *American Dream*, which was one of the ships that brought the Marines to New Zealand.

Surge looked at Jason. "There is a full crew on board about to leave within the hour to pick up more soldiers from San Francisco. Follow the signs and go to the bridge. Tell the captain that there is a smallpox victim going home. Mason," he turned to Mason, "Go to the sickbay and tell a crewmember that you're sick and you'll be treated." Surge gave his order and then smiled weakly.

"You're going to the State's boys." He remarked.

Jason itched his back as he ascended the gangplank, slightly lifting the cuff on his wrist in the process. Lieutenant Surge spied a rash on his exposed wrist and the feeling of dread overcame him again.

"Jason... You have the sickness too." Surge uttered.

The boat's steam engine was churning, its voice reverberating throughout the ship's corridors. The prow of the vessel was ploughing through the mighty waves of the Pacific.

Jason and Mason, both healed, stood on the deck, staring off into the horizon.

"What should I do? My whole life has always been in New Zealand or in the army." Jason pondered.

“You can work on the ranch with me.” Mason answered. Why not? Mason thought. He is a farmer, so this would be a breeze.

“What is a ‘ranch’?” Jason asked.

“It’s an animal farm. You raise the livestock, then, when it’s old enough, it’s transported to the meatworks to be killed, processed and cut.” Mason replied, then continued to explain the animals in the ranch, their feeding habits and other things like that.

“Where is this ranch?” Jason questioned.

“To the south from here, in a state called Texas. The ranch is by a city called Austin.” Mason informed

“I...I will go then. I will go to Texas and work on your ranch with you,” Jason complied. “I can hardly wait.”

“No need to wait long.” Mason assured.

He pointed to a long mass of land on the horizon.

“I’d say you have to wait an hour or two.” The men smiled and anticipated the future they’ve just forged for themselves.



American ship sailing to New Zealand

By Jake Ree