

Prelude to War

Bear was awake when she and Jake returned to camp not long after sunrise. He'd packed everything up, and was brushing his teeth with the help of a bottle of water. He spat, rinsed, and then greeted them.

"Morning. Big day ahead."

She smiled at him, but Jake didn't say anything. He just went to the wheelbarrow, and grasped the handle, pulling it into motion. Bear moved to intercept him.

"I got that."

Jake waved his free hand.

"You've been pulling this for the better part of two days. As much as you might *look* like a pack-animal, it's my turn."

Bear coughed out a laugh.

"Ah, I love your little-man humor."

They made their way back to the road, and headed west again. It didn't take long to reach the freeway interchange. As they did, they saw two figures approaching it from the other direction. Jake stopped, and started to reach for his bow, but the two had also obviously seen them as well. They bolted for the trees to the south, and were lost from sight within seconds.

She thought Jake might comment, but he didn't. They just continued on under the over-pass, and then left onto the on-ramp, now headed northwest towards their destination. They'd only travelled a few miles until they came to a mileage sign stating, "Garnet, 15 mi.". Next to the sign on the south side of the freeway was a large meadow ringed with evergreen trees. Jake stopped, surveying the field of grass.

"This is as good a place as any. Brin, will you keep watch while we do this?"

She nodded at him.

He started to turn away, hand on the wheelbarrow, but then he turned back. He looked into her eyes, and his question to her was clear as he raised his eyebrows.

She looked within herself one last time. Was there any way she could give it up? Let him take her blocks as well, and go back into the dark once more?

The idea of it made her frantic. She could feel her heart-beat accelerate, and tears were backing up behind the thinnest of part of her resolve not to shed them.

She could see that he saw it on her face. He smiled at her then, and tipped his head to one side. Then he turned away, dragging the wheelbarrow into the tall grass. Bear followed him, and they did what Jake had decided to do. She felt relief and guilt in equal parts. She felt it pull at her as she turned in place next to the sign, looking outward for signs of anyone observing them, but drawn inward at the same time to her inner conflict, despite the fact that the decision was already made.

It took them less than an hour to return, sweaty and tired. Jake told her how many paces from the sign, and gave her markers for the path. He then started to confirm the same with Bear, but Bear wasn't having it.

"Dude. I was there, ok? Fuck off."

Jake laughed.

"I deserve that. Shall we?"

They moved on, the greatest treasure in the world falling behind them as they wove their way between dust-shrouded vehicles that hadn't bothered to try to pull over when the power went out.

Three and a half hours later, they reached exit 21. The road leading away from it at the base only extended far enough the other way to accommodate the off-ramp on the other side. If anybody exited the freeway in either direction here, they were either doing a u-turn, or bound for a single destination.

That road wound slowly upwards through a valley towards a circle of high hills jutting up behind a line of trees. Not too far before the road disappeared from sight into the forest, she could see a bridge across a small river.

Bear pointed towards it.

"That's the bridge I told you about. The town itself is maybe a mile past it. That's new, though."

It was clear he was talking about a small, rough-hewn structure flanking the right side of the bridge entrance. Jake responded.

"Guard shack?"

"My guess."

Jake nodded.

"Well, we're here. No reason to wait. Brin, time to get into character."

She felt the first stirrings of doubt as they walked the road towards the bridge, but refused to entertain them as she followed behind, hand on the cart. As they got closer to it, she could see that the guard shack was just a three-sided enclosure with a sloped roof. The rear wheel of what looked like a mountain bike was visible, leaning against the back of it. They were still at least five hundred feet from it when a man stepped out to face them. He waited in place as they approached, hands crossed behind his back.

At about twenty feet distant, he put up his hand palm out, signaling them to stop. His voice held the manufactured courtesy of law enforcement.

"That's far enough. This is a closed community. Can I ask you your business here?"

She could see another man in the enclosure, bow up and arrow in place, but not drawn yet. She thought Jake might answer for them, but he turned around and looked at her across the cart.

"This is yours, Brin. Your play."

She could feel the doubt radiating off of him, and that fed her own, but she still needed to know. She spoke loudly as Jake returned his attention to the man ahead.

"I'm looking for family. Is Grant Whitman still a resident here? I'm his grand-daughter."

She could see that the man recognized the name, it was clear on his face. It only took him a couple seconds to respond. It was non-committal, though, in the same tone of generic politeness he'd used earlier.

"Wait one, please."

He turned away from them, moving to converse with the man in the enclosure. She saw that one nod after a moment, and the first man returned to the road. He faced them again.

"I'm going to need to get permission for you to proceed. Please wait here."

Both she and Jake said "Ok" at the same time.

He nodded, then pulled the bike from behind the shack, and mounted it. He rode away up the road, soon disappearing along its path through the trees.

Bear was the first to just sit down on the tarmac next to the wheelbarrow, crossing his legs and reaching into his pack for a water bottle. She and Jake soon followed suit, after a bit of theater in which Jake played at escorting her around the wheel-barrow to join them. They settled down to wait. The man in the enclosure had lowered his bow, but remained standing, finger holding the arrow in place. He watched, but did not engage them.

After a few minutes, Jake turned to Bear, speaking softly enough that the other guard couldn't hear.

"What's your take?"

She watched Bear shrug, then let out a deep breath through his nose. He took a few moments longer to answer, and she could see him chewing on the inside of his lip before he did.

"He's here. And he's somebody here, as well. That guy wouldn't have made the effort so quick for rank and file."

Jake nodded.

"Agreed. But this isn't where it's going down. If they let us up there, that's the place. If it goes south--."

She interrupted them.

"What are you talking about?"

Jake turned to her.

"You're the connection. Bear and I are the question marks. If we go up there, they are going to try to separate us. I'm asking you to not let that happen."

She frowned at him at first, but then got it before replying.

"I understand. But, what if the only way I can find out about whether my mom and brother made it here is to do that? *I need to know*, Jake.

I'm family. Why would he treat me any other way?"

His lips tightened into a flat line, and she could tell he was conflicted as well as frustrated. She could hear it in his voice as well. She could actually see him choosing words for his response.

"You remember the family at the gate? I let them go, and you know what that cost us.

There are new lines in the sand now, and as hard as it is to say to you, I don't know what side of them your grandfather stands on. Or, your mother and brother for that matter, if they're here."

She bristled at that. Partly because of how unfair it seemed, but also because there was a new part of her that could recognize the idea he might be right. She took the easy way out, and just repeated her demand.

"*I need to know!*"

He put a hand up, half-heartedly.

"Ok. I get it. Let's see what happens."

He looked away, his attention on Bear now, and she realized he'd finished trying to convince her and had instead turned to logistics. She was surprised at the range of emotions this one small movement activated in her. She felt anger, sadness, embarrassment, and another host of hybrids she couldn't fully define.

There was a moment where it occurred to her to let it go. She could tell Jake and Bear that it was ok to walk away from this thing that she'd set into motion. After all, it was just an exploration of her

history. The players were now long removed from the life she was living. She'd sought *them* out, not the other way round. They had known where to find her a long time before now, if they'd really wanted to.

But she couldn't put it down, in the end. She didn't say anything as Jake and Bear discussed what to do. Jake was talking about the man in the guard shelter.

"He's going to be here if we are hot-footing it out, but I can't see taking him now. And, we'd have to do the other guy on his way back if we did."

Bear's only answer was a shake of his head, because the man in the shack stepped out then. He still held his bow, but it was at low ready, like before. He turned his head away from them and looked up the road towards the trees. He must have known exactly how long the trip his comrade had taken lasted, because the man on the bike coasted out of the trees not ten seconds later.

He approached quickly, gravity doing all the work for him. He stopped after crossing the bridge, stowed the bike behind the shelter, and came over to them.

"You're cleared to the next check-point. Mr. Whitman will meet you there. It's just past that belt of trees.

A couple things. One. Stay on the road. If you don't, you'll be considered hostile, and treated accordingly. Two. If you are allowed into the town, your weapons will be temporarily confiscated. If you disagree, you will be turned away immediately. If you resist, same result as number one. Is that clear?"

It was obvious the man had made this speech many times before. It had the same cadence as a recitation of Miranda rights.

Jake responded for them all, and didn't make any attempt at fake courtesy.

"Yeah, we get it. Can we go now?"

The guy's facial expression didn't change at all. He just nodded, and then stepped back towards his partner, his duty discharged.

She followed behind the cart once more, holding the rear rail in an attempt to continue the fiction for anyone watching that she needed the guidance. They crossed the bridge, the clear water below burbling along its pre-destined path, and made their way along the road up the gentle hill behind it. The early afternoon sun was warm, and the slight breeze carried portents of summer. It was redolent with the smell of evergreen needles, pine sap, and warm earth.

Still, it was a relief to enter the shadow of the trees, where it was cooler and the road leveled out for a bit. None of them spoke as they traversed the lane between the banks of evergreens, the end of which was almost immediately visible about a quarter-mile ahead.

When they reached it and stepped out into the sunlight, they all stopped as one. She forced herself to keep looking forward, but it was tough to do. She had to rely on her peripheral vision to get the full scope of what lay before them.

A huge swath of clear-cut land ranged away from each side of the road, many thousands of stumps providing testimony to what had been here before.

In the fore-ground, two yellow school buses were parked perpendicular to the road, one on each side. They were facing the same direction, with only asphalt between the front bumper of one, and the rear of the other. The doors had been removed, as well as the windows on the side facing them, and she could see at least two figures in each one. The yellow paint was faded and blistered, the tires were flat, but the legend "Pine County Unified" was still visible on the sides.

Eight men stood in a ring around another man, this one significantly older, filling the space between the buses. It was quite clear who they were waiting for. Four of them had compound bows similar to Jake's, and the other four held a few different versions of bladed weapons.

The most arresting thing, however, stood maybe another quarter-mile distant.

It was a wall made of vertical timbers. Each side marched away from a tall, metal double-gate that spanned the road, each side of the wall disappearing into the distance. It was hard to tell how tall it was, exactly, but nobody would be jumping up and grabbing the top of it, she could see that. Jake bumped her out of it by addressing her.

"Brin. This is it. We need Oscar-worthy, here, ok?"

"Ok. Come get me."

He came around the wheel-barrow, made a show of taking her hand, and then led her beyond it. They continued on towards the men and the buses, Bear holding station where he was. They got within twenty feet when the old man spoke, his voice a pack-a-day rough. His gray hair was cut short and ragged, and she could see her father in him, though without any of the softness in her father's regard for her.

"Far enough. Leave her there, and back up."

When Jake replied, she knew she was now standing next to the dangerous version of him.

"Yeah, I'm not going to do that."

The old man didn't even hesitate.

"It wasn't a request."

"Didn't think it was."

She felt the tension ratchet upwards. She put out her left hand, intentionally missing Jake's forearm once before grasping it. She kept her voice low enough to prevent the men ahead from hearing her.

"You said this was my play."

Under her hand, she could feel him tense even more. His reply was terse.

"And I also said this is what would happen. You are tying my hands here, Brin. Just ask him."

Her next words would prove to haunt her for some time to come.

"I can do this. I *need* to know, but *we* need to end up somewhere with other people. You know that's true."