

The Breaking of the Three, Part Two

Bear saw the movement across the road, and the shift of Brin's head to follow it. He was opening his mouth to warn Jake, but Jake was ahead of him.

"Got her. Got left."

Bear mirrored his side of the statement back at him, even as he flipped up the tarp at the back corner of the wheel-barrow. He grabbed his little surprise with his right hand, and his wrist-sling with the other. He could see Jake had already knelt behind the cart, bringing his bow up, arrow ready. He heard the first release before he even got the words out.

"Got right."

Then he was moving, sprinting on a diagonal that would take him towards the front of the bus on his side. Adrenalin lent speed, but history provided the whip. He wasn't bound by the throat here. He had agency. And fuck if he wouldn't use it. There might be an arrow with his name on it, but until it found him, he would try to get her back.

He heard several hiss by, one in front, at least two behind before he reached throwing distance. He reached across himself, two fingers around his sling free enough to pull the pin.

He pitched it side-arm, and watched the trajectory even as he ran. It was true enough, the little package glinting in the sunlight as it tumbled in flight. It brushed the front section of the open door frame, but bounced deep into the interior.

Welcome to the new world, assholes. The cubes make the rules.

One second, two.

Then the bus exploded.

He felt a savage delight as a portion of the sheet-metal roof burst upward, flame and smoke billowing into the sky as the wind-shield and the remaining windows on the back and rear side were blown outward. He felt the heat as he cut across the front of the bus, raising his sling even as he fished a ball-bearing out of the pouch at his hip to load the shot. He knew they'd be on the run now.

He was right. One man had Brin in fireman's carry as Grant and what remained of his escort ran towards the safety of the gate back up the road. Even as he watched, one of two rear-guard bow-men took an arrow in the chest as he shuffled backwards. The other one let one fly, but then turned and ran, trying to catch up with the rest.

He got off one shot, and took out the laggard's knee. The man did a pretty spectacular face-plant, and made no effort to get up, just howled in pain and writhed on the asphalt.

Then he saw Jake appear beyond the smoke between the buses in an all-out sprint up the road, in pursuit. Even from his vantage point, he could see the determination on Jake's face.

Movement farther away caught his attention then. The metal gates were sliding apart, and figures were starting to pour out like water through a vertical spillway.

His heart sank as the reality crystallized.

There was no getting her back, at least not now. Not with the distance between. His only shot was to save Jake from himself. Even as he charged ahead, he knew what the cost of that would be, and he felt all the losses he had had to experience so far wash over him. This time, he'd even played an ace up his sleeve, and he'd still lost her.

He also realized that he wouldn't catch Jake before he clashed with opposition.

It only set his resolve in concrete, though. They'd only get her back if they survived this. It was a new truth that he knew Jake couldn't see, at least right now.

He stopped.

Bear had always seen solutions in his head when faced with almost any problem. He'd come to rely on his ability to solve them, either in the moment, or across whatever time was necessary. That was, until the King, and Evanston, and the eventual death of his daughter.

He knew he could let that stop him here, or he could try to do what needed to be done. It wasn't even really a choice he found, as he raised his sling.

He was familiar with the mechanics. Wind speed, declination, his motor skills, and Jake's forward motion as well. There were more variables, but all the calculations needed to be sub-conscious, because he could do it, or he couldn't. He then set another small metal ball into motion, and hoped.

It was odd to him in that split-second, that the idea of hope was something he could still identify and appropriate for himself.

He was only a half-step into another sprint when he saw something spark off of the tarmac at Jake's feet, and then Jake's trailing boot caught behind his forward leg mid-stride. Jake went down, and went down hard.

It was ugly, because of Jake's instinct to protect his bow. He could only put up one hand to break his fall, and he was already moving fast. The other held his bow out to the side as he plowed into the asphalt.

It was beautiful, because Bear now had a chance to reach him before anybody else could, and the success gave him another hit of adrenalin.

He covered the distance from the front of the burning bus to where Jake had fallen in about four seconds. Jake was just starting to push himself up, and Bear could see blood running down his face. Arrows hissed by ahead and behind with increasing frequency as he reached down and hauled Jake to his feet, dragging him bodily back toward the buses.

He felt something flay a hot line across the top of his shoulder, and thought that this was all too little, too late. He should have....

Didn't matter. He wouldn't have, even if he'd known. He was a prop now in this new drama, by his own choice. He'd play his role until he couldn't.

Then he and Jake were lost in the clouds of black smoke drifting out from the still-burning bus. He thought the cube he'd duct-taped to the grenade must still be somewhere near the ignition point, because flames still raged within it, casting heat outward.

Jake had been compliant so far, but must be coming to himself after the fall, because he started to resist and protest.

"Let me go!"

Bear just gripped him harder, and continued to pull him back. They passed into the clear air behind the two vehicles, and he hauled him towards the tree line. They'd have to leave the wheel-barrow behind.

Jake was lean and strong, and he was obviously spooling up to try to break Bear's hold on him. His protestations and struggles escalated, until Bear spoke into his ear. His voice sounded harsh and unforgiving, even to himself.

"You can die here, Jake. Or we can come back for her. You choose."

