

## The Station

Bear located a large duffel bag in one of the abandoned cars. It was full of clothing, most of which he dumped out, but he saved some of it.

One of the things they'd discovered in trying to bury the cubes was the difficulty of keeping them apart. Stacking them to fit the hole they'd dug put them all together, and after the incident in Junction City, Bear had suggested putting something between them to prevent the faces from touching.

So, they had used prairie grass to line each stack, so no cube-multiple would form.

When he joined Jake at the burial site, he used the remaining clothing for the same purpose as Jake handed them to him out of the hole he'd excavated. Some of Jake's fingers were bleeding, but he didn't seem to notice or care. Once all the cubes had been disinterred and stored, they made their way back to the road and continued on, the duffel bag across Bear's back. They didn't speak at all.

It was nearing evening when they coasted up to the open gates of the National Guard station. The guard-post kiosk windows only held shards of glass at the edges of the window frames, and vines had grown up and into the interior. There were two Humvees parked to either side of the in- and out-bound lanes, both with turrets up top and the barrels of fifty caliber machine guns pointed outward at a world that they held no power over anymore. Like every other static element littered across the post-power landscape, they were covered with rust, dust, and leaves.

The one on the right sat in front of a sign that had not aged well, except for the upper right-hand corner, perhaps because of the profile of the vehicle parked in front of it.

Only the word "Base", and below that "4<sup>th</sup> Wing" were still visible across the wind-scoured face. Within the fenced perimeter topped with razor wire, a number of buildings including what looked to be two aircraft hangars and an air control tower sat among the over-growth. Two long runways stretched length-wise across it, behind the cluster of structures in the fore-ground. Even from the gate, Bear could see tall weeds and grass growing up through interruptions in the concrete along their length.

They leaned their bikes against the steel bollards in front of the kiosk, and then took a moment to look at the installation. Twilight was approaching, but it was pretty clear there was no one here.

Then they heard the barking begin, and could see shapes rushing toward them through the grass from within the station. Jake spoke first.

"Well, shit."

He didn't wait, though. He drew and fired while Bear was still pulling ammo out of his pouch. Bear heard a pained yelp as he pulled back and looked for a target. The long grass made it difficult to find one. All he had were the tips of vectors through disturbed prairie grass. He led one a bit, and fired.

He was rewarded with another yelp, but in the meantime, he could tell there were at least eight more inbound, and they would all burst out of the tall vegetation on the other side of the perimeter road in seconds. He did the closest thing to taking charge he would allow himself.

"Jake! Take high right!"

He hoped Jake would know what he meant, but he needn't have worried. Jake sprinted to the Humvee on his side and leapt up onto the hood, then climbed up into the turret. Bear thought about how they seemed to always be doing these reflective motions, Jake going one direction, and he another but arriving at a common articulation of unified purpose. He didn't get to think about it long. He'd barely made it up onto the other vehicle when large dogs with matted hair and eyes devoid of any sort of

domestication swarmed around both trucks, barking and snarling. There were more than he'd first thought, and he wondered what they could have been surviving on here as he fired metal bearing after metal bearing from his sling at the swirling, snapping jaws below.

It seemed longer, but Bear knew that it couldn't have been more than a couple of minutes before he and Jake put down all but two of the pack. These last ran back towards the road, away from the station. Even as he watched them go, one tumbled into a lifeless heap, an arrow jutting from its side. The last one disappeared across the road into the trees.

They each dismounted from their perches, and met in front of the kiosk again. Bear looked at Jake, and could see his blood was still up, his eyes aggressive and full of the conflict. His words were almost a challenge as he faced Bear.

'I'm not eating dog for dinner. I'm going to go get us something, unless you need me to help sweep this place.'

Bear didn't even bother to weigh the options. Jake needed to go, and he needed to let him.

'Nah. I'm ok. Got some electrical stuff to sort out first anyway. Be safe.'

Jake didn't even acknowledge his response. He just turned away, and began to recover what arrows were still viable from the canine bodies strewn around the two Humvees before heading off along the same path as the last dog.

Bear turned his attention back to the task at hand, knowing the Jake he'd let go was a predator, and didn't need anything from him.

He saw what he was looking for almost immediately, but thought that there was something he needed to do first outside the fence.

There were skeletal remains around the vehicles, the bones and rags of BDUs woven through with ground-cover growth. He'd found the grenade here what seemed like an eternity ago. Elise had been with him then, alive and hopeful, and also several others they'd met on the road. It had been a curiosity, something even then that had seemed like it was from another time. That's why he'd kept it.

Bear went through what remained of pockets in the rotted clothing, and eventually was rewarded with a plastic swipe card on the tattered remains of a lanyard. He put it into the pocket of his jeans, and then turned his attention to the open gate.

He went to one side and pushed the wheeled section closed, the hubs squealing from disuse, and then did the same for the other side. He didn't try to secure it, assuming Jake would do that when he returned. That done, he headed towards the large metal utility box half-hidden by vegetation at the corner of the fence near the road.

It was pad-locked, but brute force with a loose piece of concrete he found at the base of the box gave him access to the interior. It took him a minute, as he wasn't an electrical engineer by trade, but the diagram on the inside of the metal cover made things pretty clear. He closed the connection to the power grid, and then shut the box again.

Light was fading fast as he finally made his way toward the buildings, using the perimeter road rather than wading through the waist-high grass in front of them. He targeted the largest of these, and was rewarded with a small sign above two double glass doors that said "Administration". Most of the safety glass glittered in the leaves at the foot of the doors, but interior steel shutters had kept at least this entry secure. Twenty or so feet to the right of them, there was a single metal door, with a magnetic card reader near the handle.

Bear knew this was the big risk part. He shrugged the duffel off of his back, and sorted out eight of the cubes, and looked at them. All he had was the Junction City test to base probability on. He shook his head, and thought of a Star Trek quote.

‘Energize’

He put four against four, making the eight cube-multiple.

Exterior lights winked on across the front of the building, as well as elsewhere on the base. He'd sort of expected that, and would deal with it as soon as he could. More importantly, the light on the mag-reader lit up, glowing red. He pulled the swipe card from his pocket and pressed it against the reader. The light turned green, and he heard the bolt draw back in the door with a scrape and a click.

He stowed the cube-multiple intact into the bag, pulled the door open, and went inside.