

## Part One

### A Fair Judgement

"You can read, right?"

The voice came from my left, up in the tree line. I stopped walking, and put up my hands, thinking for the third time in as many days, this is it. How to respond. I went with ignorance. A poor choice, it turned out.

"No."

"Allow me. It said trespassers will be shot."

"Guns don't--."

There was a "thwock" sound even as I spoke, and an arrow buried itself in the snow three inches from my left foot.

I put my hands up higher.

"You armed?"

"Just these two." I said, waving my gloved hands, feeling the first hints of irritation beginning to warm.

"A joke. Interesting move, I guess."

This time, the wait was at least half a minute. Then,

"Keep walking straight ahead. Stop at the gate."

The voice was moving as I heard it behind me, descending the slope towards the road. And by road, I mean what I had assumed was a snow-covered fire break. The no trespassing sign had been more bullet hole than sign at least a half-mile back, on what I would still have a problem calling a road. I told myself to just say nothing, then didn't listen.

"You're not going to eat me, are you?"

The voice was much closer behind me now, and I could hear footsteps in the snow, though muted.

"Another one. That your thing? You have to know by now there are worse things I could do to you."

*Well, fuck.*

Then I could see the gate ahead as we rounded a tree-shrouded corner. It was a metal livestock gate, with three-strand barb-wire fencing stretching away to either side. I walked up to it and halted.

"Drop your pack."

I did.

"Step to the side."

I did that too, still facing the gate. I could hear him drag it back a few steps, and then the sound of him going through my stuff. I resisted the temptation to look. More minutes passed. I heard his knees both pop as he straightened up.

"Ok, turn around."

He was taller than me, but thinner. I guessed he was sixty-ish, but who could tell. He had gray hair, a gray beard, and kind brown eyes despite the harsh look on his face. He'd stowed his compound bow across his back, but held a machete in his right hand, tip toward the ground, at least for now. He

held my gaze for a few long moments before speaking, as though wanting to see what my eyes had to say.

“Why are you here?”

I shrugged.

“Why not? People are really losing their shit now. I’m just trying to get as far away from that as possible.”

His eyes narrowed a bit.

“You know anything about life out here? Know how to survive?”

“Not much real world experience, but I read a lot. Even as I say that, I get that’s not a ringing endorsement.” He shook his head.

“No, it is not. And, honesty aside, you’re not making a great case for me taking you any further. What good are you?”

The fear I’d been trying to fend off shouldered its way in, and my heart rate accelerated. I could see that he could see it as well. He didn’t relent, though.

“Well?”

I was lost for at least a ten-count, mentally cycling responses that all seemed worthless against the high water mark set before me. I was about to give up, when a memory rose out of nowhere.

My dad didn’t think much of me, and wasn’t ever shy about letting me know. We lost my mother pretty early, and maybe that was it, or maybe he was just a prick. Or maybe both were true.

I think I was eight, or so, and I remember working with my dad to tear down the old shed in our backyard, after cleaning all the junk out of it. It was a long day, hot and humid. The sun was setting, and we were both soaked with sweat as we got the last of the debris loaded onto his flatbed trailer.

I remember it very clearly as we both headed toward the back porch, walking side by side. He didn’t look at me when he said it, but his tone was the closest to kind as I’d ever heard from him, despite what he said.

“You aint much, but you sure know how to work, kid.”

The memory ended. So, I went with it in the here and now.

“I know how to work, sir.”

I don’t know if it was the words, or my tone of voice, or just what, but I could see his expression relax. He sighed again, but sheathed the machete, and indicated my pack with a flick of his finger.

“Ok. Grab your stuff. Let’s go.”

I didn’t know what to say, so I just re-slung my pack as he opened the gate, and we passed through. It clanged shut behind us, and I trudged ahead of him along the snow-covered track masquerading as a road for a while longer. The longer he didn’t say anything, the more I found I wanted him to. Finally, I couldn’t stand it.

“At the risk--.”

“Stop. First lesson of what I sense will be quite a few.”

He coughed then, and I had to wait for the rest, but not long. It wasn’t information though. It was a challenge. The first of many, it turned out.

“You want me to tell you what’s happening now. What you can expect. You’re assuming I’ll tell you the truth. Why would you assume that? Because I let you through a gate? Maybe I *will* eat you.”

I had nothing. This guy was channeling my dad at this point. We walked in silence for several minutes, through six inches of fresh powder on a constantly narrowing trail. The trees had drawn down on each side to the point that they now blotted out the sky above, and we made our way through a dim tunnel towards who knew what. I decided that if he wanted to play the uncertainty game, I'd just pester him until he gave me an answer, or took me out. Fuck him. Annoyance was a tool, as well.

"If you took my last Slim Jim, we are going to have a problem."

Nothing. Just footsteps behind mine. This dude was stone cold. Fine, I could double down, too.

"You --." He shut me down on the first syllable.

"Shut up. Pissing me off is stupid. Want points? Stay silent."

I was tempted to escalate, but forced myself to shut it down. Then there was only the sound of our footsteps in the snow.

My dad had passed when I was nineteen, and I'd made my way, such as it was, by myself. I was in my mid-twenties, now. I had worked, paid my bills, survived. I'd never had many friends when I was younger, and didn't have any now.

I'd come to know myself a little better in recent years, but I think this understanding was still quite nascent. I knew three very specific things about myself, and it was not a triumvirate that lent itself to making connections with other people. I was deeply afraid, I was deeply obligated to meet what I perceived were other people's expectations of me, and I was deeply angry. The first two taken alone would have me pictured as the definition of "doormat" in any psychology textbook, but the last one, that was the spike in the punchbowl.

It was this last one that I attempted to hem in with humor, but anger is caustic, and humor can tend toward sarcasm. And sometimes, if I let it, sarcasm could become vitriol. That certainly wouldn't help me right now.

I replayed my interaction with this man, and saw I'd just been doing the same shit as always. So I jammed my hands deeper into my pockets, and vowed to stay silent, which is what I almost always did when dealing with people who held more power than I did at the time.

After about fifteen minutes, the trees drew back from the track again, and it ended at another gate. This one was more substantial, and the fencing pushing away from it on either side again was also. The posts were set in concrete, and the metal framing was fronted with sheet metal panels. It wouldn't keep out the Mongol hordes, but it looked pretty tough. Through the metal lattice of the gate, I could see a house, and some out-buildings in a wide pocket meadow surrounded by steep hills. From here, it looked like the fence encircled all of it. I stopped at the gate, and waited. He side-stepped me, fingered a combo-padlock open, and then slid the gate aside along a concrete track.

"Go ahead."

I walked a few paces in, and listened to him reverse the process. I turned to face him, then. Not sure why. He completed his transaction with the gate, and started to move past me, but stopped as he caught my gaze. He came to rest, and maintained the eye-to-eye, but didn't wait to engage. He faced me up close, eyes intent.

"What?"

The words came out in a rush, and I found that I had no control over them. Part of me was horrified, part of me was embarrassed, and part of me wanted him to try, but none of me could stop it.

"Why? Why am I here? If you're going to kill me, just do it already. That's what we're all doing now, right? Neutralize all threats. Survive at all costs. Don't make me wait! Just get it over with! C'mon!"

I ended with my fists in the air, and tears on my cheeks, and I hadn't even seen it coming. What a joke.

He just looked at me, and his expression didn't change, but I could see something going on in his eyes. It was there for a second, but then he looked away. His voice was neutral as he walked away toward the house. He spoke, even as his back retreated.

"Wake up, kid. I'd have done it if I was going to. You're safe, for now. Let's go."

I couldn't move for a bit, and he'd covered almost half the distance to the house before my muscles relaxed enough for me to turn and follow. It was like my words had drained everything I felt out of me, and when I started after, I was numb. I caught up as he was kicking snow and mud off of his boots against the concrete steps leading up to the enclosed porch.

I said the only thing that I could think of, not sure if I really felt it.

"Sorry."

Then I got the real him, out of nowhere. I can picture it clearly, even now. All the confidence and capability he'd shown me up to this point had been camouflage. He looked at me, and I saw all the rage, frustration, fear, and despair that hid behind it. I could see it, because I knew it. What I didn't know was the source. But that was coming.

His words were calm, though.

"I don't need your apologies. I need your help. You have a name?"

"Jake."

He nodded.

"Jake, Dave. There's someone else I need you to meet too. Follow me."

He led me onto the porch, and then into the house.

It was well lit with windows, and a few skylights. The front door opened into the living room, and on a sofa against the far wall sat a girl. She was late-teens, early twenties, not that I'd ever been very good at guessing things like that.

I got to know the room quite well later, but I couldn't have told you anything about it then.

The girl was captivating, and I lost all of me to her right then, but I couldn't have told you why, because she wasn't anything I hadn't seen many more beautiful versions of my whole, lonely life.

She looked at me, but it was clear she didn't see me. Her eyes were pale, and deep-set, and looked far beyond where I stood. I could see that she was blind.

But she did see me.

"Brought home a stray?"

Her voice was lovely, and unremarkable, and compelling.

Dave made a vague gesture with his hand.

"Jake, Brin. Ignore her, she's not good with strangers. Come on."

He went ahead, heading for what looked like a kitchen through a cased opening beside the sofa. I told my feet to follow, but got a busy signal, at least for the moment. All I could do was look at her. I knew it was ridiculous. The reasonable majority of my will screamed ineffectually at me to move. Dave reached the doorway to the kitchen, and looked back at me. He stopped.

"Let's go, kid. This isn't the Odyssey."

I looked down, and was able to move. My voice was feeble as I passed the sofa and the girl, and my eyes never left the floor.

"Nice to meet you."

As I passed into the kitchen, she spoke again, her voice carrying from her spot on the sofa.

"This is a bad idea. You know it is."

Dave appeared to ignore it, and went to the sink, filled two cups with water from the tap, and then offered me one. He saw me still looking at the taps, and offered,

"Gravity fed."

I nodded as I took the cup, and drained it. He sipped his, looking at me. When he spoke, I thought at first it was to me, but his words made it clear.

"No, I don't *know* that. And neither do you. Guess we'll find out."

He set his cup down, and motioned for me to follow.

"C'mon, I'll show you the rest of the place."