

## Keep the Wolves Away

The first night was uneventful, even pleasant, despite the fact that we were sleeping on a stone surface, not comfortable mattresses. The fire burned down as the night progressed, but the stone walls retained and returned the lackluster heat into the space, so there was no morning chill when I got up to stoke it.

Brin's sleep had seemed fitful, what I caught of it in my own off-and-on wakefulness. At one point, it sounded like she was talking, but the words were unintelligible. Or maybe I dreamed it, I don't know. I'd thought about asking to split a watch with her, but I was now in new territory. Dave had set our schedule at the compound, and we'd just followed it after he passed. Now, it was just us, and I didn't have the confidence, or the relationship with Brin to choose for us both.

Happily, day-to-day was not a problem. I dealt with the fire early, and then went out to get more fuel for it while she slept. Then, I brought in more supplies from the hidden sled. When I got back, she was awake, and had started breakfast by feel, as she'd done many times at home. I ran some river water through a filter, and then bottled it for later, after handing off some to her.

This was us, two point oh. We already knew how to do this. We were Dave's star pupils after all.

But, we were now without our master, alone together outside the controlled environment he'd created. I wondered what she felt, while I felt the weight of indecision.

Fuck you, Dave, for dying.

I'm tempted to say I'm sorry for that. It's harsh. But I won't.

Our second afternoon and evening passed much like the first, with the exception of a meaningful interaction of any kind. Brin went through the bags I'd brought in, probably to inventory, but maybe to negate the empty space between us. No disagreements this time, just more silence, and sliding around each other.

I did summon the balls to suggest we split the watch the second night. She didn't resist, and said she'd wake me in a few hours. I was happy to close my eyes, and let go of it for a while.

She woke me in much the same way as the night we were forced to leave the compound. She was quiet, leaning over me, speaking softly. Her hand was on my shoulder, and as I arose out of sleep I could tell she was exerting the least amount of pressure possible.

"I hear voices outside."

She let go the instant I responded.

"How many?"

"At least two. Maybe more."

I shrugged quietly out of my bag in the low light of the embers in the fire pit, and picked up the bow next to me. I'd been thinking about what to do in the event this came to be, but surprisingly it had been a nearly subliminal, background process. It would appear I'd made some progress with it though, because I knew what I had to ask her right then.

"You want me on defense, or offense?"

Even as I asked, and saw fear temporarily replaced by puzzlement on her face, I cursed myself for expecting her to understand a short-hand that didn't exist between us. I kept on, in an attempt to explain.

"I can try to fend them off. If I make it hard enough, maybe we can negotiate a swap. This place, for us to be able to leave. Maybe not, I don't know. That's defense. I think you know what offense is."

Puzzlement fled, and she looked stricken. My first temptation was to just act, deciding by myself, now that action was required. But something in me refused.

"You may hate it, but it's you and me, now. We *need* to agree. As you said, I'm not your dad."

Once again, it played out in her expression. Interestingly enough, it almost looked like she focused in on me for once, not what she longed for beyond me. It was a storm of fear, anger, uncertainty, and desperation. But she did give me an answer.

"I don't want to go."

"Ok. I'll need your help, though. Grab your sleeping bag. I need you to hold it up across the entry."

She just nodded, and went to retrieve it, moving in that uncanny way that seemed to contradict her sightlessness. I shrugged a quiver across my back, and took a second to fit an arrow, waiting to draw until I was in the no-man's-land beyond the inner entrance. At the last minute, I thought to take Dave's machete, though if it came down to that, we were in big trouble. I knew how to hold it, but that was the extent of my expertise. Brin met me at the inner entrance, and I spoke softly to her.

"Hold it up as high as you can, and for as long as you can."

She nodded.

I moved into the entry, and the low light of the fire within disappeared behind me as she blocked the bulk of the entrance with the sleeping bag.

I stopped halfway to the outer entrance, and listened intently. I absently leaned the machete against the stone wall behind me, just in case there was a need for it. For a quite a while, there was nothing. Then I heard them. It was amazingly clear.

"Lights out and time. Let's go." Man one was confident, but man two's reply was quieter, though the acid in his tone was unmistakable.

"Fine. Go ahead. Worked out great at *your* cabin, right?"

"Fuck you, Gerry. I'll do it myself, and you can go somewhere else."

Gerry's response was no response that I could hear, and man one snorted.

"Uh huh."

I could hear shifting stones on the beach outside below the entrance, and I drew slowly to a full pull, and held it. The vines at the entrance shifted aside, and ambient starlight shone through. A dark mass pushed upward from below, and started to fill the space.

I let go.

The sound of the bow's release echoed in the tiny space, and there was a grunt of pain that tapered to nothing almost instantly. Then the dark mass disappeared in a reverse version of its appearance, but quite a bit faster.

Silence reigned for a while.

I was conflicted. Part of me wanted to leap out, but the stupidity of that choice was clear.

The only action I took was to move as silently as possible toward the outer rift in the rock face, stopping just a few feet from the opening. I could feel the evening breeze pushing through the vines, and despite the situation, it felt wonderful.

Then man two spoke up from outside. He didn't seem to be put out at all that man one was no longer man one, from either a hierarchical or existential viewpoint. *That* was a data point.

"So, sort of expected that. Any way we can figure this out? Not looking to invade, just exist. Not a lot of places to do that these days."

I replied.

"Yeah. Because this."

"Fair point, but I'm going to assume you heard our disagreement. That wasn't my idea."

"Guilt by association, man."

My response was pro forma, as I was thinking as fast as I could. Sadly, I am no great strategist. I could only think of one option. It unlikely to work, but I had to do something. I took a few more silent steps forward, getting as close to the entrance as possible without disturbing the vegetation hanging down across the entrance. I could see a fair amount of the beach below through the strands of vine occluding the rest of it.

I waited, but didn't have to wait long. I could hear sibilant whispering to the left of the entrance. There were three different timbres of whisper involved, so I had at least that many to deal with. I could tell now where they were, backed up against the stone embankment, out of sight. I remained silent.

Original man two, who I guess was really new man one now spoke again.

"What proof do you need? We don't have anywhere else to go, and we're out of food. Please."

Then another option occurred to me. Maybe I could talk our way out of this. Even as I considered it, it didn't seem likely, but why not try? I replied.

"You want a place? Tons of food? Defensible? You're not getting that here, but I know of one not too far away. Maybe nine, ten miles."

More whispers. New man one.

"Where? And why aren't you there?"

"Top of the north-east end of the valley. And I was there for a bit. They occasionally let people in. You know, people with the right stuff. But then, there was a change in management, and I...didn't have the right stuff anymore. It's that kind of world now, wouldn't you agree?"

He leapt on it, ignoring my question, and my tiny hope dimmed.

"So it's just you up there?"

"As far as you know. You're free to come check, if you want."

This time, there was no whispered consultation, and I could actually hear him pitching me the idea of fatigue in his tone. I steeled myself. I didn't think it would work, anyway.

"I don't think we could make it that far. Could you just spare some food, and a fire? We can move on tomorrow, I promise."

"Step out to the river. All of you."

Silence for at least twenty seconds. Then,

"For what?"

I was getting really tired of this. The past year had done a lot to wall off my fear, but anger was always close. I got ready, and then responded.

"You asked what proof."

There was more whispering, and then two figures trudged into view, heading for the water. They reached it in a few steps, and each one turned to face the entrance to the cave, raising their hands.

"Any weapons, toss them in the water. And you *did* hear me say 'everybody', right?"

They didn't move. New man one shook his head, kindly letting me know which one he was right up front. His upheld hands dropped outward, palms up, as if to question my question.

"Come on, now. We're it. And we can't do that. Not now." He was trying for nonchalance, but not quite making it, and could hear impatience behind it. No great actor, this guy.

"Ok. Well, no food or fire for you idiots. Try up the mountain. They only have a fence."

He lost first composure, and then everything else as he exploded in anger, leaning in and starting to move. To me, it didn't matter if he would check himself or not.

"You can't stay in there forever--."

New man one became man down in a single second, once again. It was a beautiful shot, maybe fifteen yards, and the vines in front of me didn't even twitch. I found out later it was a head-shot, through the right eye.

Sigh. As I wrote that last part, reader, it occurred to me that I might be presenting you with a skewed version of how good I actually am. Technically, not morally, you understand. You know what I've done.

The morning we were forced out of the compound, I put every shot nearly where I wanted it across a significant distance, and that is the best version of what I can do. I will say, I am proud of that. Dave pushed me hard at first, but mostly I pushed myself later. What else do you do when the two most important people in your life mostly face towards each other, or inward? I'll tell you what I did. Shoot, chores, hunt, and shoot.

I think what I haven't told you about were the misses. Game gone free, and long pulls of an empty sled on the way home, or Dave having to do it himself. Dave saying,

"Are you even trying? What did I tell you?"

Can you blame me? Don't we all want to present the face we think the world wants to see?

Mister number-two Ticonderoga with the petrified eraser will now be honest about what came next after new man one dropped without a sound.

It was an utter cluster-fuck.

New man two bolted at the sound of the release. He was out of the frame before I could even fit one again. I'm pretty quick at a reload, because every once in a while, you do get a second shot. But I'm not that guy in the *Lord of the Rings*, and this was a confined space.

So out I went. I leapt forward through the vines. While I didn't face-plant onto the stones of the beach, it took a second or two to get to equilibrium as I landed, slid, and then found my footing. It took me a few more to target the guy headed back towards the face of the embankment. I pulled and let go an instant before somebody slammed into me from behind.

Self-preservation seemed to give me a little nudge in real time. I was able to flip my bow outward as well as bring my other hand up to shield my face, saving both from damage as I crashed down onto the rocks littering the beach with the added weight of someone atop me. I could feel the person fumbling for something, even as we came to rest.

I released the bow, and swung my forearm up. Then I whipped it back, bringing my elbow in tight as I bucked and rolled aside. I felt a solid connect, and the person on top of me wasn't that big, so I was able to pitch them to the side, freeing myself. I rolled away, the stones stippling more of tomorrow's bruises against my ribcage until I could get to my feet, and face my remaining attackers.

I made it upright, but I could see that I'd also missed my shot at new man two, and he was now headed back in fast towards me, a long knife held in close as he moved across the uneven surface between us. The guy that had hit me was rising from his knees, trying to get upright as well, still struggling to get his knife out.

I took two steps forward and put an emphatic boot between the legs of Mr. Tackle, just as he reached vertical. The resulting apical hesitation due to a body in deep conflict with itself gave me a two count to withdraw, and then launch myself forward. New man two was just starting to cut around Mr. Tackle in his attempt to get to me, and I brought us all into the same point in space.

It wasn't perfect. Mr. Tackle's high-pitched groans were a sound-track to intersection and departure, but he was the only one to actually hit the ground. I was still upright, and new man two was stumbling away, wind-milling his arms in an effort to remain so. The knife in his hand scribed silver circles as he did. I reached down, and relieved Mr. Tackle of his knife.

Here it is. Lots of distance kills for me so far, but no longer, reader. I dragged the tip of the knife across Mr. Tackle's throat, and then leaped across him, desperate to finish this before potentially having to face someone who might actually know what he was doing. New man two was trying to turn as he caught his footing, but I beat him by maybe a half-step, and I hit him hard, two-handing the strike into the side of his neck. The geyser of blood was black in the low light. I caught some of it, having to swipe at my eyes to clear it.

He fell, and I watched him die, the heavy breath of effort slowly tailing off as I became aware of a keening sound behind me.

A small figure sat against the base of the embankment, hands wrapped around knees, rocking back and forth, gaze intent on the bodies.

It took no notice of me, until I crossed the distance between us, and stepped in between it and its focus.

A small boy maybe ten years old looked up at me, and I could see tears falling, even as my presence silenced him. But his eyes held another truth, evident even in the scarce illumination.

*My mother died at home, and my father kept me home from school in the last days before it happened. Even though she rarely surfaced in the lake of pain she swam in, he demanded that I spend hours by her side. When she did occasionally open her eyes, and see me, this was how I felt.*

I was un-done. Falling to my knees on the rocks before the boy, I begged for forgiveness I would never get.

"I'm sorry."

His tears were drying already, and his response was explosive. He leapt up, drawing a small knife as he did so, burying it in my left shoulder. His sorrow was utterly displaced by rage, and he managed to withdraw it and stab me again before I came to myself and blocked a third attempt. I disarmed him, and held him in place as I tossed the knife away, the pain of the injury mostly lost in the whirlwind of the encounter. He stared up at me, and the hate radiating off of him felt like heat. His words were an almost unintelligible growl.

"Let me go."

There was nothing in me to contradict it. I released him, and took several steps back.

Our eyes stayed locked for only a second more before he turned and sprinted away along the embankment to disappear among the trees masking the meadow beyond, but in that second, I felt

marked. It was as if he had painted a sigil on me, a tag that would demand a payment from the future me.

Then the pain intervened, and I could feel my shirt plastered against me as blood soaked downward toward my waist across the impact trauma I'd sustained. I made my way back to the entrance to the cave after retrieving my bow, and climbed up, feeling the agony in my shoulder accelerate as I did so.

"All clear, Brin. We're safe."

I said it, but didn't believe it. It didn't matter, as long as she believed it.

I could hear her sigh, and the low glow of the dying fire filled the back end of the entrance once more as she let go of her sleeping bag.

"Are you ok? That sounded bad."

I answered honestly.

"No."