

## The Way Things Fall

It took a while before we re-engaged, nearly an hour, and only then because evening was approaching. Brin broached it. I imagine she could feel the heat leaching out of the day.

“How far off the road should we camp?”

“What?”

She repeated the question without any additional emphasis, but I could feel it around the edges.

I shrugged, and immediately cringed at the idiocy of the action. I gave it out verbally.

“I don’t know. Maybe beyond line of sight?”

She frowned, and was also slow to respond.

“Ok. That’s kind of on you. Are you alright?”

“Yeah, fine.”

“Said everyone, not fine, always.”

I used a laugh to cover my irritation, to no creditable effect. She didn’t hesitate.

“Are you mad at me?”

Was I?

No. But, yes. Though, only in that I was angry at everything.

“No, not at you. I can’t imagine you expected to become the you you are now. I didn’t expect this me. I don’t know how else to say it.”

She didn’t reply, but she did feel along the wheel-barrow handle until she encountered my hand, and patted the top of it.

It helped, but not as much as before.

We camped on the backside of a hill away from the road. The sun drained away, and we didn’t bother with a fire. After a cold dinner, I took first watch, and watched the stars resolve above as Brin slept. I kept waiting for my inner conflict to re-ignite, but it didn’t. I woke her a few hours before dawn, and then slept.

We had two days of conflict-free travel as the low hills steepened, and became mountains. We returned to mostly silence between us, but it wasn’t anything enforced, like before. We interacted when we needed to, and then each returned to our respective contemplations. It felt like we were both in a holding pattern, waiting to see what came next.

The county road eventually met up with an interstate, and the leavings of life before became more apparent leading up to the inter-change. Abandoned vehicles and more and more human remains told a pretty clear story. We’d not passed through any towns up to this point, but that changed a couple miles up the highway. As soon as I could read the mileage marker sign, I turned to Brin.

“Ever heard of Pine Notch? It’s a couple of miles ahead.”

She nodded.

“It’s the only town before you get to the pass. It’s pretty small, though.”

“Should we try to skate around it? How small?”

She tilted her head dramatically, as if trying to recall.

“Pause while I consult the book of Dad. Jeez. How should I know? He said, ‘small’. Like one reference. Ever.”

“Ok, ok. Any opinion on whether we should go around?

She looked toward me.

“I’m going to defer to the working eyeballs on this one.”

“I have to do everything around here.”

Again, no laugh, but a smile.

The next sign to appear around the forested bend in the highway was an exit notification. There were two for Pine Notch, and one was only a quarter-mile ahead. It read, “Dark Lake Recreation area”, and the one a mile and a half beyond it was “Business District – SR 78”.

“This just in. Around it is.”

“Ok. Share?”

“Logic dropped by for a minute, and reminded me we haven’t met anyone yet who didn’t want to kill us and take our stuff.”

“Mmm.”

Then we were engaged again. We slipped into conversation, and she was telling me about her early memories of Dave when we reached the first off-ramp, and followed it away from the interstate. It transitioned onto another two-lane that wound its way through tall pines, the canopy high enough to cast the black-top in deep shadow as I lost sight of the highway through the trees. There were no derelict vehicles here, and the quiet hum of the wheel-barrow tires seemed to grow louder as any other ambient noise withdrew into the forest around us. Not far along, a road departed to the left, marked by a US Department of Forestry sign announcing “Dark Lake Unit – 7 mi.”, with symbols for camping, fishing, and boating. We stayed the course ahead.

Brin, always more attuned to sound than I was, at first attenuated her vocal volume, and then stopped speaking all together at the end of an anecdote. She began to turn her head this way and that. She raised a hand as I began to inquire, so I stayed silent. Then she motioned for me to halt. I slipped the bow off of my shoulder as I did.

“Get us off the road.”

I didn’t hesitate, just guided the wheel-barrow in a turn, allowing her to follow the motion. We crossed the dirt shoulder, and made our way through knee-high brush to the trees, passing into deeper shadows as I alerted her to the terrain in a low voice. We skirted around the edge of some deadfall and then halted behind the center of it.

I could hear now what Brin had been hearing already. The still distant sound of horses on asphalt, bits of conversation, and a rusty creaking behind it all. I leaned close to Brin, my mouth near her ear.

“Hang tight. Taking a look.”

She nodded.

I moved quietly to the other end of the fallen tree, getting low to peer around the partially-exposed root ball.

Two men on horseback bracketed a third sitting at the front of a utility trailer, attached by a makeshift rig to a third horse controlled by rope leads. Several other men walked along beside the trailer. Everyone was armed with edged weapons, and a couple of them had bows, either slung across their backs, or hanging from saddles. I took this all in instantly, but what threw me was the line of figures following behind the trailer. Two women, and a small girl followed behind, bound in succession along a length of rope.

The men looked reasonably well-fed, and the trailer was stacked high with boxes and plastic totes tied down with rope and bungee cords.

The women, however, were gaunt, and the child seemed on the verge of collapse. None of them had shoes, and their clothes were rags.

It was a clear picture, even from this distance. I could feel myself starting to slip towards an ignition point I wouldn't be able to come back from, and that would probably cost me everything. However, something else was pushing at me, and the counter-pressure was enough for me to stay aloft for now.

Dave had tried to connect me to his love of the hunt. At least in the early days, when there was enough of him to still care about things like that. Beyond teaching me how to shoot, he talked about the different methods to intersect with game. I tried to listen, because I loved him, and was grateful. After Brin told me about her brother, I got some clarity about his motivation, but at the time I found I didn't care, beyond being happy to have food to eat. The art of it held no interest. I knew that if I hadn't been forced into this new version of the world, hunting was something I would never have considered as a hobby.

Something he'd told me tapped urgently, demanding my attention.

There were different methods to put the hunter and game within range of an interaction.

I watched the group on the road draw closer. There was no attempt at stealth. The hooves against the black-top, the banter between the men, and the un-lubricated protestation of the trailer axle bloomed into the otherwise quiet space between the trees.

Was it pushing? Flushing? Dave had talked about how a hunter at a distance, moving in tandem with a loud distraction might cause game to break cover and provide a shot. I think we'd tried it a few times, to limited success.

Shit.

I moved quickly back to Brin, and leaned in again.

"Stay still. Gotta hide you. Don't worry, I'll be line of sight."

She nodded as I grabbed the tarp off of the wheel-barrow, and shook it out over her. Then I pulled some loose branches and mulch off of the pile above and covered it. I didn't wait to evaluate the job I'd done, but moved as quickly and quietly as possible deeper into the trees, putting more distance between myself and the road. I took up station behind a wide tree trunk, and leaned several arrows against it in easy reach. Then I waited.

I could see the pile of branches I'd left Brin under. It wasn't perfect, but it was pretty good, hard to see unless you were looking for it. All I could do was hope, now. Maybe this was all a waste of time and adrenalin anyway.

The group on the road drew even, and then slowly passed by. I knew that if this was going to happen, it would be soon. I tensed and drew, aiming at a spot slightly above Brin.

Nothing happened. The sound of the procession began to recede, and I began to relax, starting to diminish the tension on the string.

Then he was there. His movement through the forest had been utterly silent, and I almost let go in surprise as his form interposed itself between me and my view of where Brin was. He paused, a slight but tall figure dressed in forest camo and a boonie hat, bow in hand. He surveyed the view towards the road and his companions moving slowly away, his inspection seeming to halt as he inspected the back of

the fallen tree where Brin crouched under what now seemed laughable cover. Whose fault was that, Jake?

I had him, though. I knew it. Maybe fifteen yards, and I was dead center on his brain stem. I would not miss, and he would die without a sound. Nearly all of me was already committed to it. I could almost hear the release.

But I held it, and within five seconds, he started moving again, his focus now forward along his parallel path through the trees. He followed the departing sounds of his soul-less brethren, and was soon lost to view.

I finally relaxed my draw, letting out a tense breath.

Then a voice behind me said,

“Should’ve taken that shot.”