

Allied Forces

We didn't make it.

We'd gone maybe an eighth of a mile before half a dozen figures streamed out of one of the buildings ahead, and took up station across the roadway. There were a couple of bows, and the rest edged weapons. I let Brin know, and we came to a halt with about a hundred feet between us and the crew ahead. I un-slung, drew, and pulled, and I heard her extend her baton.

They were all young, late teens to early twenties, and while I could tell this wasn't their first rodeo, there was something about the line-up that didn't seem to carry much menace. The two with bows were ready, but I could tell from even this distance that their shots weren't entirely lined up, on me or Brin. The others had their weapons drawn, but not held close in, in case they needed to move. It struck me as theatrical. To further reinforce this, the one in the center pointed at me with his machete, and started to speak.

"Leave the wheel-barrow, and you --."

I didn't wait. I chose one with a bow and put one in his gut. He let go right after I did, but that went way wide and right. The other corrected aim, but hers skittered off the road, slamming into and shattering against the front of the wheel-barrow. I could feel splinters of it pepper my leg as I reloaded, and stepped out in front of Brin.

Then everything halted as I readied my next shot, and lined up on Mr. Machete while his downed crew-member writhed and screamed in pain. The girl with the other bow had pulled another arrow, but stopped short when I twitched my aim towards her.

"Don't."

Mr. Machete stared at me, and all I could read on his face was consternation at first. Then he grinned and spoke, and even prior to the content, I got confirmation what a life meant anymore, at least to him.

"You're not making it through here unless you leave everything right now, and run. That was pretty cool what you did with the truck, but my dad is on his way. No fucking way you survive that, and she won't want to. Get me?" He indicated Brin with a slight shift of his eyes.

I looked at him, and lined up.

"Step aside, asshole, or it won't matter to you how this plays out."

He spread his arms wide, and he leaned into it. His eyes were bright with something I couldn't put my finger on at first.

"Bring it."

I got it, then. This was his proving ground, his hunt. He had a Dave.

Well, shit.

A red mist puffed out from the right side of his head, and he collapsed. A slight "flap" sound came right on top of it, and I tracked the sound up and right. Even as my head turned, I could see Brin was already facing that direction.

A huge man stood atop the retaining wall facing the road, ascending ranks of pines bending slightly in the breeze behind him. To their right, a large field of stones interrupted the sea of trees, a big swath of gray in a steeply-angled blanket of green. Wild black hair and a black beard framing black eyes registered, as well as the hand-held sling, but he was already pointing with the other hand, indicating

the road out of town. His voice was not nearly as big as he was, more rasp than volume. I had to mentally play back what he said before I understood it.

"Go. They're coming."

Two things came in at once, information from opposite sides of me.

The others ahead had bolted back towards the building they'd come from, leaving the still-squirming pin-cushion and an inert Mr. Machete behind, clearing the way forward.

Behind, I could see at least a dozen men sprinting toward us from much further back down the road. Even from this distance, I could tell this was the A-team. They were older, harder, and running flat out, the biggest of them way out front.

"Gotta go, Brin."

"Where did he go?" Her question brought my attention back to the big dude, even as we started to run again, pulling our wheeled burden behind us. I glanced back, over my shoulder.

He was gone.

"Don't know. We have much bigger problems."

"Don't we always."

We'd almost reached the edge of town when we heard a deep rumble behind us. We slowed, and then stopped, turning to look behind. Brin only partially turned.

The stones I'd seen earlier were rolling down the ridge-side, and poured out onto the roadway, scattering and bouncing as they gained speed. The entire hill-side descended behind them, dirt and tree trunks following behind. The men following us were buried, along with a significant portion of SR 78, and the buildings fronting it.

I couldn't move, lost in the spectacle. Brin snapped me out of it.

"Jake!"

"What?"

"What the *hell* was that?"

I told her, still partially caught in a mental replay of it as I described it.

There was no hesitation in her response.

"It was him."

I turned to look at her.

"How?"

She shrugged, and her answer didn't address my question.

"Not everybody can be against us."

I stared at her. She looked confident in her assumption, even hopeful. I turned back, and surveyed the debris field behind us. Nothing moved.

Given I had no better explanation, I figured I'd just let her optimism stand. It couldn't hurt. I didn't share it, but what did I know. I offered out a platitude.

"Thank you, mysterious stranger. Best of luck to you."

She reached for me, and pulled me to face her. Her face was upturned, and her pale eyes sought mine, with no way to document any final alignment. It didn't matter to her. She meant to say what she had to say.

"Don't do that. Do we need to run, or do we have a minute?"

"Looks ok."

"Then listen to me. You are not the things you had to do to get us here. If that's true, why can't other people be like that?"

What she said hit me like a fist to the sternum, but I didn't flinch, waiting for the rest of it.

"If it's all gone, what's the point?"

I couldn't help my response.

"What if I really am those things?"

She smiled, but the words were a heart-break.

"You'd have never taken me along."

We went on, following the route forward. We didn't talk any more, until we stopped to camp for the night, opting for a copse of trees not far from the road. I built a fire, and we ate, and one moment he wasn't there, and the next he was. I started at the sight of him, but Brin spoke out, waving a hand in my direction.

"Easy, Jake. I heard him coming. I should have said."

He towered at the edge of the firelight, having halted there. He stared at Brin, as if I didn't exist. She motioned him in.

"Sit. Thank you for today. What's your name?"

He lumbered in, shrugging off his pack, and dropped to a sitting position, crossing his legs before the fire. He set the pack beside him, only then acknowledging me, nodding briefly before focusing back on Brin. Up close, I could see scarring around his neck only partially hidden by his beard. He then whispered a reply. I guessed the scars were why.

"Bear."

Brin was smiling at him, and jealousy poked a green-tipped shoot above the surface of my internal soil. I stomped at it, but it eluded me. She kept on.

"You did that, right? How?"

Bear seemed to weigh the need of a reply, and decided to give one up.

"I was an engineer. I know how."

He didn't offer any more. Instead of asking for clarification, Brin asked another question.

"It's hard for you to talk?"

He nodded, and then proved he knew the score by articulating his answer.

"Yes."

She went right to the heart of it.

"Will you come with us? That's why you're here?"

Bear looked at me then. There was a lot in it, and I had no rubric to interpret it. It came down to whether I was going to back Brin's play, or not. I put a hand up, and raised my eyebrows at him, feigning confidence to hide my apprehension.

He regarded me for longer than was comfortable, but then turned his attention back to Brin, and gave her a whispered answer.

"Yes. I was just waiting for you."

He looked back at me.

"And you."

