

More Than Words

Brin beat me to it.

"What do you mean by that?"

Bear looked upward into the night sky, and drew in a breath. When he looked back at her, it was with a deep longing, but not one that alarmed me. I wish I could define it for you. In a world that seemed intent on consuming the last bits of itself, it was a forbearance. His answer was another whisper.

"Two kinds come through here. Sheep, and the wolves. Big packs get through, small ones get eaten. All flocks pay."

He looked at me, and then mimed turning a steering wheel, grinning.

"But nobody does that."

I pointed at Brin.

"It was her idea."

As he focused back on her, it was clear that his longing was not *for* her, but inspired by her.

Then, the penny dropped for me, because I am slow. Brin got it, though nothing was said to clue her in, and she certainly wasn't getting visual input. Her receiver was on a different, smarter wave-length.

She said it.

"You lost someone. To them."

"Yes."

"I'm sorry, Bear."

He nodded at her words.

"I was a sheep. I paid. Now they did."

That hung in the air for a bit. Brin nodded. It didn't entirely land for me.

I called him out, because despite the pathos, his story didn't exactly lead to this intersection.

"That doesn't really answer the question, though. Why us? Why now?"

He looked back at me, and I could see wheels turning. I waited for anger at my question but it didn't show up, at least that I could see. He put up a finger in a "just a sec" motion. He dug through his pack, liberating a water bottle from it, and then pulled something from his shirt pocket. He passed the item off to me, and then drained half the bottle.

He'd given me a picture. I couldn't remember the last time I'd held an actual photograph, chemically developed. In it, a much younger version of Bear stood on a concrete sidewalk with a wide river flowing below and behind him. He had one arm around a pretty blond woman, and in his other arm, he held a tow-headed girl, maybe two years old. The woman and the girl had the same pale blue eyes.

I looked back at him, and he gestured for me to hand it back. I did. He flipped it around to face me, and tapped the woman first with a finger.

"I lost her many years ago. Before all this."

Then he indicated the girl, and I could see him clench, though he didn't stop. He pointed back towards Evanston, and I could feel the fury in the next words.

"We paid, but she really paid."

Then he pointed at Brin, and I could see that this part was something that was only meant for me. It was a ship of past agonies, given a new rudder. We recognized each other. I nodded, but knew that this was at best a hand-shake, certainly not a blood-pact. To me, he was still only one step from an adversary, and I think he knew it too.

Brin was impatient with the cryptic interchange, though it was just a pause for her.

"Jake?"

I continued to look him in the eye as I said it.

"I think you *might* be right, Brin."

"Right, how?"

"*Maybe* not everyone is against us."

I looked back at her just in time to catch the end of her eye-roll, and the sarcasm was clear.

"Oh, well, *kind-of* thank you. *Maybe*. We'll see."

"I just...."

"Nope. The moment has passed. I have someone new to talk to, anyway."

I could see Bear turn his head away, but not before I saw the smile tugging at the corners of his mouth.

I shut up, and then watched in amazement as Brin proceeded to become an entirely different person from the one I knew. Her tone was bright and inquisitive, and it was almost like poor Bear was on a talk-show. She probed, but lightly, until she figured out that a topic was safe, and never led him into a dark alley. She didn't ask about Evanston. She figured out early that family-specific questions were off-limits, at least for now, but still got him to reveal bits of his past that inferred clues about them.

Bear, for his part, seemed entranced, but it was a struggle for him. He killed two more water bottles across an hour or so, and massaged his throat a few times, but couldn't seem to help himself.

At first, my jealousy was a problem. I kept confronting it, and it would slide away, but then come slithering back. Why him? Why not me? I'd not received a tiny portion of this interest from her.

But as the conversation went on, I began to see a higher-resolution picture of Bear emerge, based on his responses. When he tapped out, telling Brin he couldn't talk anymore, and asking if it could wait until tomorrow, I felt like I had a clearer view of who he was. He was smart, and he was good. Or, he was a great liar. Either way, there was certainly more to Brin than I'd seen so far.

Bear rolled out a sleeping bag, and lay down atop it, staring up at the sky again. His return to silence seemed to have brought him back to a state of rest.

Brin did the same, except she crawled inside hers, shrugging it up to her chin, and turned toward the fire. She looked at me, or so it seemed. I sat upright, watching her. Time passed.

Bear began to snore. Nothing obnoxious, but they sounded real enough. I fed the fire, and then looked back at Brin. Her eyes were still open. Then she spoke in a whisper.

"Come here."

I skirted the fire, and knelt next to her. She turned onto her back, and put out a hand, finding my knee and resting it there.

"You heard it, right? You probably saw it. He's ok."

I walled off all my doubts before I answered, because true belief is hard, and requires practice.

"Yes."

She looked up at me, and it was the closest I'd ever felt to the idea that she could actually see me. She smiled as she spoke.

"Tell me."

"I love you."

"Show me."

I leaned down, and kissed her, and it was every good thing I'd ever felt.

At least it was for me.

When I pulled back, she squeezed my knee, and then rolled away from me, pulling the sleeping bag up around her shoulders again. I actually begged.

"Wait. I can do better than that. One more chance."

"Nope. The moment has passed. I'm sleepy."

Bear coughed, mid-snore.