

Still of the Night

I decided that frustration was as good a motivator as any to stay awake, so I walked away from camp back towards the road. I stopped just outside the edge of the trees, and found a flat rock to sit on, resting my bow across my knees. All I had to do is turn my head, and I could see Brin's sleeping bag, and the fire. There was a half-moon out, and it illuminated the stretch of road that alternately headed back to Evanston, and toward whatever was west of it.

I sat there, and began to doubt everything. The middle of the night is that place that calls it all into question, and now there weren't lamps to switch on, or phones to reach for to contradict or distract from it. There was nothing but the unknown.

I looked up at the stars above, though they were somewhat diminished against the moon-glow. I thought about what Dave had said.

This is important. Something slapped us so hard we've gone back in time. You're not interested? No ideas?

I resisted at first, because the idea of contemplating the reasons why I was now where I was just made me angry. Beyond that, I felt incompetent to even hazard a guess.

But it was an interesting question, if you bled all of my emotional response out of it.

How seemed important, of course, but why seemed to be the bigger query.

So I began my contemplation, and just as I did, I could hear someone coming up behind me. I knew I was too late, but started to stand and turn, when Bear put a hand on my shoulder, and pushed me back down, whispering at me.

"Relax, Romeo. The moment has passed. Again."

"You're a dick."

His laugh was a wheezing cough, as he sat down next to me. He patted me, and let go.

A few minutes went by before he spoke again.

"You saw what she did?"

I looked at him, and nodded.

He ran a hand through his black mane, and sighed.

"It's like talking with *her* again. I knew it would be, but I could only handle so much." He shrugged. "So, you have questions?"

I thought about it, not sure.

"One thing."

He nodded, waiting.

"You're no sheep anymore, are you?"

His grin was predatory, and gave answer before his response.

"What do *you* think?"

"It doesn't matter, as long as we're your pack, now."

He gave out a whispered howl at the half-moon.

We sat in silence for a while, looking out at the road. Then,

"Jake. It was Jake, right?"

I nodded. Brin had given out our back-story in broad strokes, and introductions had been made early during the Brin show.

"What's the plan?"

For whatever reason, the question really pissed me off. Maybe I was tired. Maybe I was still jealous. Maybe I was quite aware of the fact that this absolute stranger had stepped into my world without asking me. It would appear that I did need more than one thing. I turned toward him.

"What's *your* plan, man? Everybody's got one. I'm supposed to believe you're our new service-wolf, now? Here to serve and protect?"

He looked at me calmly, and the fact that he didn't take any obvious offense made me feel ashamed, though not so ashamed I could stop myself.

"You could have dropped that hammer a while ago, I think. Why were you still here, really?"

He sniffed, and rubbed his forehead. Then he focused on me, black eyes that much darker in the night.

"Why should I tell a man, acting like a boy?"

It was a unique experience, that. I heard my father's disapproval, and all that implied, as well as Dave's. My emotional agenda disappeared in a wisp of imaginary smoke. I could tell that Bear saw it. I nodded.

"Point taken."

"There he is. I can talk to this man."

I spread my hands, widened my eyes, and waited.

He looked back over his shoulder, as if to check on Brin. I didn't follow his gaze, because it seemed like a preamble gesture to something else. He turned back, and his whisper was quieter, as though he didn't really want to be heard.

"It took four months to set that up. Four months to watch what happened to me and mine happen to many others.

I could never get all of them together at one time. Everyone who took a turn, while the others held a rope around my throat like the sheep I was and made me watch. Little groups would get stopped too early, big ones would string them all out, and the son was always on the clean-up crew."

"The one you put down."

He nodded.

"The father ran it all, and he did it to show power. He was always first. The son did it because he liked it, and because he could. So did the rest of them."

He looked away. He was reliving it, so I just waited. Then he returned, pushing it aside.

"Then you two came along, and tied it all up in a bow. Everybody showed, and I got my chance. The father got to see what I wanted him to, and...well, you saw the rest.

There's your why. Still need my plan?"

I nodded, adding,

"For clarity."

He seemed disappointed in my response. I was too. I tried to take it back.

"Sorry. Forget I said that."

He didn't respond directly, just went another direction.

"If it wasn't for her, I would just fade out. I can still do that, if you want. There's nothing keeping me here, now. You gave me what I needed. But they are so alike...."

There were his words, and there was what he was really saying. Even I could hear it, and I could hear Brin, as well.

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?

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

"Bear, what was your daughter's name?"

That brought him right back. He stared at me, and I could see that I had entered a no-fly zone. I put up my hands before I spoke again.

"Then I can only say, I am sorry about your daughter."

He relaxed slowly, then dropped his chin in acknowledgement, but didn't reply. I searched for something else, a way to complete the transaction, because I sensed we were close, but I needed a response I could believe in. I needed to see what he was capable of.

"Swear."

"Are you kidding me?"

"No. Swear. Or fuck off."

He looked at me for a long while, then scratched vigorously at his beard in frustration before he looked back again.

"How old are you?"

"Fuck off, then." I stood up.

He stood up, and we faced off.

He was at least a foot taller, and outweighed me by fifty pounds, easy. Even his whisper was ominous.

"Pretty bold, my boy."

I should have been terrified, and part of me was. But I had easy access to anger, and it could double for bravery in a pinch.

"I'm not your boy, asshole. You came to *us*, and I sure didn't invite you. But, if you want to go, we can go. Take a shot."

He seemed to teeter on the edge of it for a few seconds, staring down at me and clenching his fists, but then it all seemed to drain out of him. He grimaced, sat back down, and looked away. Then he gave his version of the swear.

"Her name was Elise. That better be good enough."

I sat down again as well.

"I am sorry about Elise."

"Move it along, Jake. I gave it, already. Now what?" He sounded both forlorn, and irritated.

I blew out a short breath through puffed cheeks, and then told him where we were headed, and who we were going to try to find.

He thought about it. When he answered, the whisper was even quieter than before, but the information was a bounty. Not much of it was hopeful, though.

"Maybe the grandfather. Garnet's a small town, with a lot of homesteaders in the surrounding hills. They had a small prepper festival once a year there, so that's the culture. My firm did some consulting on a county retro-fit of a bridge nearby, so I've been there.

But Fall River's big, and big towns didn't do well, forget about cities. Sounds like you got out early, good for you, but when people figured out that they couldn't just torch stuff when they were mad, it all changed. There was no us or them, just a free-for-all for what was left. The more people per square mile, the higher the body count, whoever you were before it happened.

You get what I'm saying? You missed out on the big adjustment. It was fight, hide, or move, and it's hard to do any of those with no food."

I looked at him, and couldn't argue. The math made sense in light of this version of the apocalypse, and he was there. I wasn't.

Optimism was never my strong suit, so I'm not sure why I articulated something I didn't even believe. It just came out.

"Maybe they made it to Garnet."

Bear lifted one hand, a gesture that held the same amount of belief as my own.

"Maybe. It would make your plan a lot easier."

He looked up at the moon, then back at me.

"It's late. You want to watch, or sleep?"

I hesitated. He looked downward, and then back up at me, his frustration apparent.

"Make up your mind, already."

I stood up after retrieving my bow, and headed back to the fire.

Several hours before dawn, he woke me before sliding into his own bedroll.

"Your turn."