

## Ghost of You

Bear followed behind this new iteration of family, pulling the plastic wheel-barrow as they argued ahead of him. Those two were complex only in the sense that their baggage had different travel stamps on it.

But the idea that he had a family again, that was probably the weirdest part. He could still only look at memories of Elise side-ways, and never for long. That was still too fresh, too accessible. But memories of Jacque, her mom, those were a comfort. Even her end was ok now, because he'd been through so much worse since that happened. Slow decay as your wife's body attacks itself had turned out to be much less of a horror-show than what had happened to their daughter in Evanston.

Even witnessing his engineered land-slide crush the self-styled "King of the Valley" after killing that one's son in plain sight of his father wasn't enough to make amends for anything. There wasn't enough blood he could've spilled there that would make it alright.

But these two had made it possible. They'd given him all he'd needed to exact what revenge was available to him.

He wondered at them even as he trailed behind.

Jake was at once a surgical instrument, and a partially-trained dog. Bear thought that maybe that was a little simplistic of him to think, but it fit. He could see the echoes of the girl's father in everything Jake did, but he could also see the commitment. He admired young love. He'd been there a few times himself. Then, the real thing had arrived, and life had been so good for a long time.

But then the bill had come due, and he'd had to pay up. That was the selfish way to say it. The reality was they'd all had to pay, his little family of three. But now only he was left to feel the cost.

Brin, however, was many things. In truth, she was everything.

She was Elise resurrected. She was the blood-hound who could bring the old world back to them, cube by cube. She was a way for him to go on, to continue. She represented a life that he'd almost turned his back on.

As important as Brin was, though, he knew that Jake was the center. If he did not hold, that was the end of this new trio.

Bear knew he'd give his life for either of them. He felt a little sheepish about that fact, given he'd only known them for such a short time. But the truth is the truth, however it comes about.

He knew that Jake would definitely sacrifice himself for Brin. That was clear in everything he did. His sense of it now though, was that Jake would probably do that for him, too.

There was a comfort in that. He was part of a tiny tribe once more, and it was one more reason to go on in a world that was not handing those reasons out.

But he thought that the idea that Jake was the center was the greatest relief, because he didn't have to be. Nor did he want to. It wasn't on him, anymore.

He'd led his daughter into a level of terror and hurt she had never been able to return from, and now she was gone.

He was done leading.

Besides, each day going forward was one he'd not expected to travel through. As he accumulated each one, they became almost like bonus points in some video game.

Ahead, Jake and Brin faced off in the middle of the road, voices raised, each on one side of the broken yellow line on the black-top. He stopped, and let them do what they had to do. In most regards, this had nothing to do with him, so he watched their periphery while they worked it out.

They eventually did. He tried not to listen, but it was clear Jake had lost from the very start, and eventually had figured that out. After, Jake looked back at him and mouthed,

"Sorry."

Bear waved an absent hand, all the while thinking,

*You brought that one on yourself.*

They continued uneventfully into the afternoon, save one stop for another cube not far from the road. When Brin returned with it, she dropped it into the wheel-barrow, and smiled at him. Then she turned and caught up with Jake, grabbing his hand in hers, and they walked that way for a while. It was long into someone else's turn to pull the wheel-barrow, but Bear didn't care. Seeing them together like that was soothing, in a way.

Then the man on the pale horse showed up.