

Exodus

He could feel Jake almost seize up for a moment, even as he dragged him into the trees. But then Jake partially relaxed.

"Ok. Let me go."

Bear did, not sure if it was a ruse or not. It wasn't.

Jake turned to face him, and his aspect was tortured in a way that Bear knew well.

"Tell me you've got something. Anything, because I don't."

"I do. You're not going to like it."

"More than I don't like *this*? I need to know if *you* think there's a chance."

"Yes, but we need to haul ass right now."

Jake nodded. Bear could see the rage and despair in his eyes, and knew he thought he was abandoning the entire point of his life.

Bear leaned down until his face was right in front of Jake's, and he locked eyes.

"All those things you want? Only gonna happen if we make it out of here, right now. We go flat out."

Jake nodded again, and Bear saw him bury it for the time being.

Then they were running again, dodging through the trees. They kept the brief flashes of the road between the trunks to their left, paralleling it until they broke out of the forest into the meadow leading down to the river and the bridge.

Jake had pulled ahead, and as Bear watched, he un-slung his bow and nocked an arrow, all at a full run. Bear thought it might be one of the most graceful things he'd ever seen. It gave him hope, because it spoke to Jake's physical abilities.

He'd need it, if they managed to get to where Bear was taking him. Jake would have to lay one weapon down, and learn another in a very short period of time.

The two men originally stationed in the guard shack were now standing on this side of the bridge, watching smoke billow into the sky behind the tree-line and talking animatedly. It took them several seconds before they noticed the two of them sprinting through the high grass towards them, but as soon as they did, the one with the bow brought it up and pulled.

Jake broke right, and Bear decided to mirror him once again, breaking left just as the man let it fly. It was too fast to see, but he could hear the arrow pass through the widening space between them with a tiny scream.

Jake stopped, pulled, and sent one while the man tried to draw another arrow out of the quiver on his hip.

It was another perfect shot, right through the base of the throat, and he fell backward onto the asphalt. His companion, the one that had done all the talking when they'd first passed through obviously didn't know how to shoot. Instead of trying to liberate his partner's bow, he turned and ran. In a surprise move, he leapt over the low concrete wall bordering the edge of the bridge, and disappeared into the fast-moving water below.

The way out was clear, and Bear could see that there were two mountain bikes behind the guard shack, not just one. It made sense, he thought. Easier to ride here from town, rather than walk.

Then he and Jake were moving, running again without any communication to set them in motion.

Jake paused briefly to harvest arrows from the downed man, but caught up quickly just as Bear reached the small structure at the end of the bridge.

They mounted the bikes, and pedaled towards the interstate. Soon they were once again weaving through rusting vehicles, bound for the place they'd so recently interred the cubes. Jake was silent for about fifteen minutes, but then spoke. His tone was even, but Bear could hear the lake of fire burning underneath it.

"Where did you get a grenade? That's what it was, right?"

He was still thinking about how to respond to the question when Jake started to ramp up.

"Forget a laser-pointer. A fucking grenade? Who carries that shit around, just because?"

Bear braked, stopping near the tailgate of one of those stupid-lifted pick-ups complete with a fake ball-sac dangling from the tow-hitch. He dismounted, and leaned the bike against it. Jake hopped off of his, and dropped it onto the pavement, advancing towards him. Bear could see the anger and distress on his face, and wondered what he'd have to do if Jake started swinging.

But Jake didn't. He stopped, and looked up at Bear, his eyes full of un-shed tears and the dark whispers of hope forcibly removed.

"I'm going in the wrong direction. Tell me why."

The words came to Bear easily enough, and he realized that his part in this was not just as a prop like he'd thought, or an add-on. It wasn't as simple as being the red-shirt, the foil, or the side-kick. He was part of the equation, and the answer on the other side of the equal sign depended on him in the absolute way that emotional math demanded. He knew Jake needed him to spell it out, so he did.

"We have to blitz a whole town to get her back. Gonna do that with a bow and a wrist-rocket? No way.

The grenade was somewhere between an experiment and a Hail Mary. Probably should've told you, but I didn't and I'm sorry but it doesn't matter now, anyway. We're going to where I found it. Maybe we can find more. Find a way to tear Garnet apart, and get our girl."

Jake didn't equivocate, his voice hardening.

"Where?"

Bear poked a thumb back over his shoulder, figuring full disclosure was the only option.

"National Guard station. About thirty miles or so from here. Passed it by a while back."

Jake seemed to inflate a little.

"So, not just grenades, then?"

Bear wasn't interested in false hope, however.

"I don't know."

Jake let out a deep breath.

"Alright. I understand."

They re-mounted the bikes, and continued the trek back to the cubes. When they reached the mileage sign, Bear opted to give Jake a choice, rather than tell him what to do. He imagined the chaos going on in Jake's head, but he still wasn't willing to assume command. That was a bridge too far.

"You want to dig, or find us something to carry them in?"

"Dig. I need to tear something up, even if it's just dirt."

“No shovel this time.”

Jake didn't even look back as he waded out into the hip-high grass.

“Don't care.”