

### In Situ

Bear fell asleep to the distant pops of gunfire on a dusty bunk in the barracks. He awoke to the same sounds the next morning, and went down to the range himself. He spent some time there shooting as well, before moving on to the other things he knew he had to do.

He found the motor pool after a short search. It was located in one of the aircraft hangars, occupying about a third of the space within. Once again, Bear was able to get in with the same swipe card he'd found. The card reader was next to a man-sized door far to the right of the huge roll-aside ones at the front of the building. It was dark inside, until he located a bank of switches near the entrance. Rows of metal-halide lights high above began the warm-up from dim to bright as he surveyed the interior.

The only aircraft inside were two helicopters resting on tow-carts. He thought they might be Sikorsky Pave Hawks, but he'd not been an airman, so didn't know for sure. They didn't matter, anyway. What did matter sat in triplicate near the repair bay. Three tan Humvees were lined up against the back wall of the building, facing forward. Only one of them had an armored turret with a .50 caliber installed, however. Crossing the concrete floor, he opened the driver door, and climbed in. The ignition toggle flipped easily to run, and a number of tell-tale lights on the dashboard lit up, so it was clear the influence of the large cube extended this far and had worked its magic on the battery at least. He switched it to start, and the engine cranked several times, then caught, dropping into a steady rumble almost immediately.

This told him something more about the nature of the cubes. The diesel in the tank was over a year old, and shouldn't have had much efficacy, if any at all. But it did. The same was true with the oil in the pan, the crank-case, the residue in the cylinders, and on the glow-plugs. There seemed to be some renewal via the cubes for all the materials that had been rendered ineffective by the power loss. He shut down the engine, and explored the rear compartment. There were a couple of boxes of ammunition in the rear racks, but many of the slots were empty. That would have to be remedied before they left. He climbed up into the turret, and inspected the machine gun. It looked fine, but might need to be oiled. But maybe that wasn't the case though, given the engine's willingness to start so quickly after all this time. A diesel engine sitting for that long should have needed some prep to start so quickly, even assuming the fuel was good, which it shouldn't have been. Would the .50 really need the attention that time would say it did? This all would need some further thought.

All that aside, it would appear they had their ticket into the town of Garnet.

That night he sat in the mess hall across from Jake, who smelled of ammunition propellant and concrete dust. They'd finished eating, and Bear broached the subject he'd been thinking about since leaving the motor pool earlier in the day.

"Have you given any thought to where the cubes came from?"

Jake met his gaze. He looked tired.

"You're not the first person to ask me that."

"And?"

Jake shook his head, and Bear could tell by just that response that this was a subject that he didn't want to invest in. It was in his face, and body language. But he did give an answer, and Bear could hear the anger build in Jake's response as he articulated it.

"If I can't understand the subtraction, how am I supposed to understand the addition? Call it whatever you want. God, or aliens, or whatever. I can't imagine it was us, though. But maybe I'm wrong about that, too. Maybe somewhere, rich folk and their pet scientists are laughing at what the idiot masses have to do to live now. That really doesn't make any sense, though. Why give anything back in all those scenarios? I don't fucking know, or care. You of all people should understand that I only want one thing. I'll use any available tool to get her back, including *you*."

Jake's eyes were on fire as he finished and he was leaning forward, fingers white as he grasped the table edge.

Bear forced a smile he didn't feel.

"Good to know where I stand."

He saw the anger depart, and regret take its place. Jake leaned back in his chair and put a hand over his eyes, as if to blot out any visual evidence of what had just occurred. It took him a few seconds to respond.

"That wasn't fair, and I apologize. No excuse. I'd be dead if not for you."

Bear decided to just give him a pass. He did understand where Jake was emotionally, to a certain extent. He addressed the immediate issue.

"Ok, origins aside, we're going to have to decide what to do, cube-wise, when we head out."

"What do you mean?"

Bear presented it to Jake as he currently understood it. There were more parameters he needed to explore, but it made sense to at least introduce the issue.

"We got two choices, I think. Strap the eight cube-multiple into the truck, and away we go. Or, we break it up, and only use enough individual ones to do what we need to do."

"What does that look like?"

Bear rubbed his hand across his forehead before he answered.

"I still have some things to figure out, but the big cube in the truck will be like taking a power-plant into town. It'll work for us, but it'll work for them too. We know that they have at least three cubes."

Jake nodded, and his reply showed he was tracking.

"Yeah, Brin's. And whatever they may have found on their own, which means they might know what they do. If they figured it out, then we're not the only ones with guns, 'cause you said Garnet is like Prepperville, right?"

Bear dipped his chin in acknowledgement. Jake looked down at his plate for a second, as if grasping for his next thought, but then returned to the conversation.

"What's the alternative, then?"

"It's more complicated. More work for me, for sure. In the Humvee, it's probably taping a cube to the battery, the engine block, and the fuel tank near the fuel pump. Plus the .50, and probably places I'm not thinking of yet. One on the mag housing of your rifle should work, but I can't think of how to put one on that M9. Not a lot of space on a sidearm for something like that. Maybe on the front of the trigger guard, but then you couldn't holster it."

Jake frowned.

"Why can't we just tape one to our wrists? You know, the trigger side. Wouldn't that be close enough for both to work?"

Bear had to school his expression as he kept his face-palm internal. He shrugged.

“Yeah, we can try that. Maybe it’ll work.”

He moved on before Jake could say anything.

“If we do it that way, it means that we can move out as far as we need to, and we aren’t risking most of our cubes if we lose.”

“If we lose, will it matter?”

Bear decided to call him on that, because he was suddenly furious. He knew Jake was flailing internally, but he wouldn’t be doing him any favors if he didn’t address it. If Jake couldn’t overcome his deepest fear and find the will to try to confront it, then this whole thing was pointless. Bear knew this was going to hurt him more than Jake, and hated that life required it of him to relive yet again, but he couldn’t do anything different.

“That depends on you, I guess. I lost my wife years ago. Time passed, and I made peace with it. Didn’t mean it went away. That happened in a world that made sense. Then *this* shit went down, and I got to lose the last good thing I had left in the worst possible way. I watched my daughter be violated in ways that she could never come back from, no matter how much I tried to help.”

Bear put his hands palm-down on the table, and looked into Jake’s eyes, and let all the torment he’d hidden from his new friend show on his bearded face as he finished.

“I’ve already lost everything, Jake. Don’t ask me if losing matters. That’s an insult. I’m still here, and Brin’s still here. You don’t have the time for questions like that. You still have a *chance*.”

Jake stared back, and it seemed to Bear that he was trying to reconcile his internal state with this new download. His eyes were moist, but that was at odds with the thin line of his lips, and his furrowed brow. Bear could actually see the point where Jake compartmentalized his conflict. His expression relaxed, but not all the way. There was still tension in the set of his jaw, and his eyes were narrowed as well.

“I’m sorry, Bear. I hear you. As far as the cubes go, this isn’t a decision I can make. I trust you. Do what you think is best. I need to go shoot.”

He got up, snagged his rifle off of the table, and made his way out of the mess hall.