

Acceleration

Brin

The next morning, she was awakened by the sound of her cell door being unlocked. She sat up quickly as a large man pulled the door open and stepped inside. He was dark haired, and unshaven as most were these days, with a short scar under one eye. The fact that she could see him at all was made clear by the two cubes that glowed white to her in the right pocket of his frayed jeans. He was actually good-looking at first glance. But that was spoiled almost immediately by the set of his brow, and the slight up-turn of his lips at the edges. Just these two things gave him a predatory air, and Brin knew Dale had chosen this one on purpose.

Behind him stood another man, who was smaller and less imposing. This one was towheaded, with an impressive beard. The bigger one spoke.

"Time to go. We've got ground to cover. Get ya some food on the way out."

Brin put her fear down, and substituted her anger at the situation she found herself in. She shook her head, looking him in the eye.

"I told Dale that I wasn't going anywhere without Andrew."

He smiled, but it was one of those that didn't inform the rest of his face. He leaned towards her a little, and the intimidation was clear.

"Ya know I can just make you do it, right? I can make ya do anything I want."

Brin stood, and leaned in a little herself, though her fear was right behind her looking over her shoulder.

"You can try. I'm going to guess here, but I'm pretty sure Dale wants more of what you have in your pocket there." She pointed at the cubes before continuing. His eyes widened a bit before she spoke again.

"Are you that brave? Are you really ready to fuck around with his golden goose? I *will* draw blood before you get what you want, no joke, you Neanderthal. And what then? Is Dale going to just say, 'No cubes? No problem. Glad you had a good time.'? I don't think so. Andrew comes along, or I don't willingly go. And I *guarantee* you we won't find shit if you make me."

The man standing in the hallway behind put a fist to his lips and coughed, but Brin didn't think it was a cough, really. She filed that away for later. The bigger man didn't back off, but she could see something change in his expression before he re-established it with emphasis. It seemed an act of doubling-down and she thought that it was probably for effect. She hoped that's all it was.

"Feisty. I can wait, I guess."

Brin put in her last jab, and all of her wanted it to be true.

"I can't *wait* for you to meet my boyfriend."

The man didn't take the bait, just backed out of her cell, and gestured with a flourish that she should exit as well. His tone was even when he responded.

"The boss's brat is outside, waiting. We got him up first. As I said, we got a ways to go today, Miss Goose."

Jake and Bear

As the days passed, he watched Jake migrate at the range from standing still, bringing his groupings on the paper targets closer together, to shooting prone. Jake then began to vary the distance to those targets, and started to move from lane to lane as he fired. He was walking at first, but by the end of the week he was running, and his accuracy was constantly improving. He was hyper-focused and appeared outwardly calm. Between the two of them, they burned through thousands of rounds, Jake the primary consumer.

Then, there was the other Jake, outside range practice or hunting. Bear assumed the latter to be true, in that he never failed to return with a fresh kill to feed them every couple of days.

This other Jake was irritable and quick to anger. He didn't want to be bothered with the details of what Bear was doing. In the few hours at night when Jake wasn't shooting, he was morose, or frustrated. He'd stopped scribbling in his note-book each evening as well. On day four he had confronted Bear at dinner.

"How much longer do I need to do this? When can we go back?"

Bear still had a modicum of patience that early on, and soft-balled the answer, though he felt like he was talking to a petulant teenager.

"I'm still working on our ride, and I've got some tests to do first. Be patient. I know it's difficult, but people who've survived this long are looking to the future, and Brin will know that. She'll exploit it. You need to trust her."

Jake clenched his teeth, but then nodded. He didn't let up, though.

"When?"

Bear forced a smile.

"Ask me again in a couple of days, ok?"

Brin

The next eight days were mostly repeats of each other, except for the weather. Her wardens were the two men Andrew had mentioned on her first morning, the town bad boys named Ray and Charlie, who evidently had spent some time in the cells as well when they'd had too much to drink.

Ray was the big one, and it was clear what he thought his reward was going to be for chaperoning on these prospecting trips. He was never far away from her, even when she needed to attend nature's call. She knew part of it was Dale's instruction to make sure she could see, so she'd sold that bit to him successfully, but also knew Ray was more than willing to be closer than he needed to be.

Andrew was pretty easy to figure out. He was young, maybe fifteen, but tall and strong. He had long, blond hair, and was strikingly beautiful to look at. It was also clear by the end of day two that he was utterly infatuated with her. There was a little ego boost in it, as he plied her with questions about her life in that southern drawl of his, but mostly it just made her miss Jake all the more.

Charlie was more enigmatic. He didn't crowd her like Ray did, but she caught him looking a number of times. Seemingly content to be Ray's second, he nevertheless would step in if there was conflict between Ray and her or Andrew.

A few days in, she'd stumbled and fallen, and Ray was right there to reach under her arms and grab her breasts as he hauled her to her feet. She'd struggled to no avail, until Andrew crashed into Ray with a full body tackle, and they'd all gone down. Ray had needed to let go of her to fend off

Andrew's subsequent wild punches, and she'd gotten to her feet again as Charlie had pulled the young man off of Ray and thrown him aside. Ray had scrambled to his feet as well, and was starting towards Andrew when Charlie stepped in front of him and put a hand on his chest.

"You fuck him up, you know what'll happen. Let it go."

Ray batted his hand away, but made no further move in Andrew's direction. He did address him, though.

"Ya ever do that again, I'll beat the piss outta you. I don't care *whose* kid ya are."

Andrew flipped him off, but Ray just turned his anger toward her.

"Runnin' out of time, Miss Goose. *Move* it."

She'd seen five cubes by the end of day six, but only indicated the latest one to Ray. She figured that waiting until day seven to produce one would just make Dale more suspicious of her willingness to find them for him, and rightly so.

"There's one next to that tree stump." She pointed.

"Well, go get it."

"So you can get a better view of my ass? No thanks. I said I'd find them. *You* can pick them up. Besides, you'd just take it off me anyway."

Ray huffed, but went to retrieve the cube. After rooting around in the tall grass for a second, he found it and stuck it in his pocket with the other two. Brin could hear the muted click as it mated up against them, and the charcoal mist that had shrouded the outside of her two-cube sight bubble for the last week vanished.

She'd been blind again after Ray and Charlie had re-incarcerated her and Andrew at the end of each day, of course, but Andrew hadn't called her out on lying to him that first morning about what the cubes were, and did for her. Each night he'd handed his hidden cube off to her. Just that little amount of sight kept her calm until sleep overtook her. He would always wake her before their captors arrived in the morning, and she'd hand it back to him.

It was very difficult to keep her joy at seeing without limits off of her face, but she did. Inside, though, it was the hard hit of a powerful drug. It was physical, and the first thing that came to her mind was the idea of being alone with Jake in a warm, soft bed, and the things they might do there.

It passed quickly, and then became a negative version of itself.

Where was he? Why hadn't he come for her?

Jake and Bear

It was day nine, and Jake stood facing him in the mess hall. It was late in the evening, and Bear knew they were both tired. He wanted nothing more than to go get some rack time, but Jake was both amped-up and angry as well as exhausted, which was not a good combination. He wore the tactical vest Bear had found for him on day five. It was a plate-carrier, which gave some protection against center-mass ballistics, and provided storage for extra magazines of both types, rifle and sidearm. Bear wore one himself, and had insisted Jake train with his on while at the range, because the added weight did affect his response time.

Jake now looked like the young men Bear had served with during his stint in the military, except for the long hair. He'd swapped out his blue jeans for ACU bottoms, and his hiking boots for a combat

version, again at Bear's behest and supply. He held his M-4 across his body, muzzle down and finger above the trigger guard.

But he knew Jake didn't give a shit about what he looked like. Bear was sure this was the end of Jake's patience with this detour. His words proved Bear to be correct.

"I can't wait anymore. Is the truck ready?"

"I'm pretty sure, but we'll need to test it tomorrow. That means shutting this place down, because I don't think we want to leave it running to go make sure somewhere else. We'll be making a lot of noise too, because I'll need to test the .50."

"Can't we do that on the way, then? Fuck, man, this is taking forever."

Bear finally lost his temper. He was tired of dealing with this version of Jake, and there was no patience left in him.

"Do you think I'm trying to *keep* you here? Give me a fucking break, will you? Trust me or don't, but you're not the only one working his ass off to make this happen, you little shit. If you're not willing to wait until we have what we need to try to do this, then start walking whenever you want. I'll catch up. If I feel like it."

Jake didn't flinch, or even move. It was as if he was impervious. When he spoke, his voice was raw, but controlled.

"I'll buy most of that, except the last bit. You want this as much as I do. You're pushing me. I'm pushing you. I get that you're the voice of reason, and I'm retribution. I can't wait any longer, though. I'm telling you, Bear, I can't. I never really understood the phrase 'do or die' like I do now. Please. We need to go."

Bear looked at the young man standing before him. His anger didn't exactly dissipate, but was more...overwritten, by memories of arguments with oncologists, and later palliative care providers. He remembered how desperate he'd been that his wife should remain in the world, whatever the cost.

The circumstances might be different here, but the intent wasn't.

Bear nodded at Jake.

"Ok. Give me six hours sleep, and yourself the same, and we are out of here. We'll adjust on the road. You're no tier-one shooter yet, but I guess you'll do."

Jake seemed to deflate a little, not in disappointment but relief.

"Deal. Thank you, Bear."

"Thank me if it works."

Brin

On the morning of day ten, the foursome had just left the jail. They were heading for the gate to look for cubes yet again, though each was intent on their own goals as usual, hidden or not. Then, they heard a sound none of them had heard in a long time.

The howl of a diesel engine at high RPMs grew in the morning air, and then was underscored by the sound of automatic gunfire.

Brin smiled to herself, and her eyes teared up.

He was coming for her at last.

End Part Three