

## Ingress

Bear stood in the turret as Jake slowed to take the exit to Garnet. The morning sun warmed his face as the forward movement of the Humvee cast wind through his hair.

He felt good.

This might be the last time he did, but he was ok with that. He'd been here before, many years ago, albeit on a different continent. He braced himself as the truck reached the bottom of the off-ramp, and then made the right turn heading towards the river and the town beyond, and accelerated again.

He could see the guard shack at the river and two figures exiting it, obviously at the sound of the engine.

Bear mentally revisited a conversation that he and Jake had at dinner one night, back at the station. Jake had spent all day at the range, and Bear had spent the same time relocating the fuel pump on the Humvee. He'd brought it up into the cab by extending the electrical lead and the fuel lines. He had also harvested some Velcro from other gear in the station, and made a quick-release cradle attached to the pump for one of the cubes. It was now their kill-switch when they had to leave the truck, which he thought was inevitable during the upcoming assault.

Jake had been tired and grumpy as he nearly always was at the end of a long day. Bear had known that he'd need to tread lightly as usual, but it was yet another thing that the two of them needed to work out before...well, before.

"Jake. How aggressive do you plan to be when this happens?"

"I'll deal with anyone in my way. You already know that." He replied, bringing his cup up to take a drink and meeting Bear's eyes. Bear kept his expression neutral when he responded.

"And non-combatants?"

The cup halted in mid-air.

"What do you mean?"

"Women and children, Jake. This is a fortified, intact town. There will be plenty of them."

He could see the frustration ignite in Jake's eyes. He slammed his cup down onto the table, water sloshing out onto the formica top.

"*Fuck!* Leave it to you to complicate this even *more*!"

He leaned back in his chair, running both hands through his long hair while looking up at the ceiling. Bear could feel the anger radiating off of him. He leaned forward to rest his hands on the table, steepled his fingers, and waited. Jake gripped fistfuls of his hair, and Bear could see the muscles in his jaw clenching.

But he finally let go and looked back at Bear. He grimaced, and then spoke.

"Little high-strung, aren't I?"

Bear nodded.

Jake reached up, rubbed his eyes with thumb and forefinger, and then reopened them.

"You're right, of course. As usual. Agreed. I'll do my best."

Bear spread his hands in an "It's all I ask" gesture.

Jake nodded and stood up.

"I'm taking a shower. Probably won't be a lot of those once we leave here."

Bear came back to the present as the truck closed the distance between itself and the river. They were close enough now to see that one of them was the same guy who'd been there on the day they'd lost Brin. The other was another version of the bow-wielding one Jake had put down on their way out.

It was time.

He opened up, deliberately going high and shredding the top of the guard enclosure, waiting to see what the men would do. The one they'd interacted with before made a gesture to his partner. The latter dropped his bow, and both of them rabbited across the road. In a stereo replay of what had happened when he and Jake had escaped, both of them leaped over the low, stone bridge wall into the river below. Stock in trade for the first dude, it would appear.

Jake drifted to the right, just enough to drive over the bow that lay at the side of the road. Then he corrected, and accelerated even more across the bridge. Soon, they were approaching the band of trees that hid the town and the corridor that the road ran through them. They passed out of sunlight into the shadow of the tall pines.

Bear felt the truck slow as they approached the end of the forested section, and the first hints of the yellow buses beyond became visible, now that he knew what to look for. Jake braked even more, and then they were out of the trees.

Bear strafed from left to right, stitching holes in the aluminum sides of the two buses just below the window line. He saw at least two dark figures inside drop out of sight.

Then, the Humvee passed between the two vehicles, and Jake brought the truck to a halt about twenty yards past them. The driver door opened and he exited, rifle instantly up and against his shoulder as he turned back toward the buses, halting at the back corner. If anyone had survived inside them, it was his job to protect Bear's back.

Bear went to work on the timber fence ahead of them. He took his time, slowly devastating the tops of the vertical logs where defenders were most likely to be, once again from left to right. The ammo can ran dry, and he swapped out the empty with a replacement. As he did, he heard two single shots from Jake's rifle. Bear fed the new belt into the receiver and slapped it closed, and then he heard Jake yell at him.

"I think we're clear."

"Let's go."

Jake was back in the driver's seat in seconds, and the truck lurched into motion again, gaining speed quickly.

Bear concentrated his fire now on the center of the metal gate. He watched the corrugated tin near the vertical bifurcation in the gate evaporate, and the wooden supports behind it as well. He let off the trigger as the truck approached the gate, and stepped down the ladder, bracing himself against it even as the Humvee's engine revved higher.

The impact was negligible. The truck passed through the perforated center of the gate without much resistance, though the debris scraping along the sides of it did whisper of opposition.

They were in, and this was where it really began.

