

Escalation

Brin

Ray turned to Charlie, dug into his pocket and produced Brin's two cubes, and handed them off to his partner.

"Take them both back. Now. I need to find Dale."

Dale had appropriated the third cube as soon as they'd returned the day Brin found it, so she knew he had at least two in his possession currently.

She couldn't help it, even as tears traced paths down her dirty cheeks. She felt a savage happiness as she addressed Ray.

"I told you he was coming. You're a dead man walking, and I can't *wait* to see it."

Ray whirled around, hand coming up and swinging. Brin braced for an impact that never came.

Andrew stepped in between them, and took it against two raised forearms. He went down onto a knee from the backhand, but then drew back one arm that came right up again into an uppercut that landed his fist solidly between Ray's legs.

Ray dropped as though his personal gravity had tripled, curling in on himself and keening in a way that no man anywhere would want to take responsibility for.

Charlie grabbed each of them by the shoulder, and pushed them into motion once Andrew returned to his feet. His voice was quiet, but carried weight.

"If you want to live, get moving. You know the way."

Brin was tempted to resist, but knew he was right. The sound of the engine and the gunfire was still distant, and Ray would get to them before Jake did. Once Ray was vertical again, Charlie was the only thing separating her and Andrew from Ray's wrath. They retraced their way back to the jail and entered the front office, on their way back to the cell block. Charlie was right behind them as the doors closed.

Then Andrew took action one more time. In her peripheral vision, she saw him pivot, turning back towards Charlie. There was a flash of silver in his hand as he did, and she turned as well.

She saw him jab a blade into Charlie's throat multiple times in quick succession. Charlie looked confused as he fell to the floor, blood spreading outward across the industrial linoleum surface as he died.

Andrew faced her, wiping blood off of the knife onto his sweats before reversing it and offering it to her. He smiled at her, and she thought that she should be horrified.

She wasn't. Andrew spoke.

"Take it. I lifted it from Ray a while ago. Hide. I'll go find yer boyfriend and bring him to ya. But ya cain't leave me here when ya go, K?"

Brin leaned forward, and kissed his cheek.

"K."

His smile widened as he turned to kneel over the body. He fished the two cubes out of the pocket of Charlie's now-bloody jeans and handed them to her as well.

"Mine's in the mattress in my cell. Grab it before ya hide."

Brin shook her head.

"I don't need it. These are enough, and there's not enough time. I don't think I should stay here, Andrew. Ray's probably on his way now and neither of us should be around when he gets here, *especially* you. Where else can I go?"

She could see Andrew recalculating. It played out on his face like a biometric version of Tetris.

"Out them doors, head left to the side alley. Down that to the rear one, then right behind the superette. There's a pen where they keep the dumpsters. Ain't the best smellin' place, but I'm hopin' ya ain't gonna be there long."

Brin nodded, and headed for the glass double-doors, stepping around the downed Charlie and the blood slick he lay in. One last glance backward showed her Andrew grabbing a sheet of paper and a marker pen off of a nearby desk before he turned to follow her out. Their paths diverged on the concrete apron in front of the doors. She went left as he'd instructed, and he broke into a run in the other direction.

She made her way along the side of the cinder-block building, the narrow alley between it and the next opening into a fenced parking lot behind it. As Andrew had described, another wider alley ran perpendicular away from it to her right. Her two-cube sight bubble didn't extend far enough for her to see the destination Andrew had described. Brin hesitated.

Ahead were two police cruisers in parking slots against the back chain-link fence. They were covered in dust and detritus. She thought that maybe she'd rather not park herself next to a smelly dumpster, and decided to instead hide behind one of the cop cars. She made her way to and between them, and then squatted down behind one.

Brin unlaced one of her boots and removed the synthetic lacing. Cutting off the top twenty percent with the knife Andrew had given her, she used the short section to re-lace just the top section of her boot so that her foot wouldn't slip out of it.

Then, she pushed up the sleeve of her hoodie, and tried to remember how Bear had tied the drop-sling he'd fashioned for her baton.

Jake and Bear

Bear was back up on the .50 as soon as they were through the gate. They were driving through a residential neighborhood, and people were coming out of the houses. Men, women and children appeared on front porches and walkways, eyes wide and mouths open. The immediate problem was a number of the men and women were armed. He knew part of him was exposed up here, and bows were the threat. To confirm that, something flashed by in front of his eyes and a moment later something else smacked into the back-plate of his vest. The impact was very near to the top, above which his neck was unprotected.

Fuck this, he thought, even though he had known this would be inevitable.

He went high on purpose, targeting roof-lines on each side of the street and hoping that just the sound of large-caliber gunfire would dissuade the armed rank and file from attempts at heroism.

Mostly it worked. Onlookers disappeared back into houses. But he could see a few take cover and knew that they were now pulling a net of combatants behind them. Instead of unlocking the turret and swiveling it around to cover their rear, he pulled his rifle off of his back and turned. He switched

from single shot to three-round bursts, and sighted back down the road. There were two men visible, running after the vehicle with compound bows in hand and legs pumping. He fired.

One went down, and the other diverted immediately into a side-yard between two houses.

Then, the Humvee started to slow, and Bear turned back around in time to see that they would soon be entering a business district. Movement to the right caught his eye.

A young man was running down the sidewalk towards them. Bear sighted in reflexively, only noticing the piece of white paper held with both arms outstretched above the youth's head at the last second. He took his finger off of the trigger as Jake continued to slow, and then came to a stop.

The teenager was handsome. He wore a gray t-shirt, and dingy white sweats with what appeared to be a blood-stain on the top of the right leg. Bear could now read what was written on the paper in bold, black letters.

"I'm with Brin."

Andrew

He began to question his choice when the big guy with the wild black hair and beard behind the machine gun pointed a rifle at him. He held the paper up even higher, and hoped this wasn't the end of the line. He didn't want it to be, because he was in love with Brin. It was clear she didn't love him back, at least not the way he wanted her to. That was ok. One thing he'd learned early was you may not get the full measure of the good things that come your way, but any good is better than the bad. His mother had said once, "There's at least a little shit in every pie." She was right, and he missed her. He held hope that these two would put Dale in the ground. That would be all good, in his eyes, since he hadn't been able to.

The big guy lowered his rifle, even as Andrew was distracted by movement behind the windshield of the Hummer. The one behind the wheel was beckoning him with multiple inward arm sweeps. He took a breath, dropped the paper onto the sidewalk, and went to the passenger door.

Opening it, he climbed in and was immediately facing the wrong end of an automatic pistol. He decided to just coast with whatever.

"Ya must be Jake."

The man with the long brown hair and ice-blue eyes didn't smile as he responded.

"Where is she?"

"Near the jail. I'll show ya how ta get there. Straight, left at the second light."

There was a thumping sound from up above. A raspy voice drifted down from the turret.

"Jake! Fucking move it! We have in-bound!"

This was followed by several bursts of rifle fire.

He watched as Jake accelerated, lowering the gun, but keeping it in one hand as he steered with the other.

In the moment, Andrew wondered what the future could hold with these people. If he could get free from the constraints of his past, what would that look like? He was a child born of discord, and he had always wanted to escape it. His mother had given him a tenuous envelope of protection, until she was gone. He decided to articulate it to this rival in his affection.

"She said I could come with ya. Cain I?"

Jake didn't answer immediately. He braked, and turned left at the intersection Andrew had told him to. Andrew knew this was the next prompt. Up above, the machine gun barked out a loud stutter.

"Two blocks, then a right. Jail is about four blocks down on the left. There's an alley just past. Take it."

Jake did finally speak again as he made the next turn.

"If we get her back and make it out of here, that's *her* choice. If you're fucking with me, then I'm the last thing you'll see."

Andrew thought about the kiss on his cheek. He smiled once again.

"Got it. But just so's ya know, y'all ever break up I'm next in line."

Jake's response was matter-of-fact as he accelerated again. He didn't even look over.

"Not going to happen, and best not bring it up again...?"

"Andrew."

"Well, Andrew, I'd suggest choose life, and get me to her."

Brin

She'd figured out the knots including the slipknot, and had just slid her sleeve down over the drop-sling and knife. She was glad her sweatshirt hung loose on her, including the cuff. The baton had been one thing, but a sharp blade dangling along her wrist did scare her a bit. She knew she'd need to be much more conscious of it than before.

The sound of the engine was getting closer, and she was just starting to believe that this was almost over when she heard booted feet running down the alley she'd just come down herself.

Then the diesel engine was even louder, and growing in volume by the second.

She stuck her head tentatively around the end of the patrol car's dusty bumper, and immediately regretted it. She saw that it was Dale and Ray, and unfortunately, Dale was looking right at her when she did. She knew she should've listened to Andrew about where to go as she saw him grin and pick up his pace, yelling at her at the same time. In his hand, he held a gray automatic pistol, probably a .45. Ray held an AR in both hands. Her grandfather was nowhere to be seen.

"Git out here, little girl. Right now."

Brin debated whether to comply, but knew it was pointless to run. She'd have to trust that Jake and Bear would figure out how to deal with this.

She stood up, and moved along the cruiser with her arms at her sides. The hidden blade bumped slightly against her skin, but it felt fine. It felt like hidden power.

Dale aimed the gun at her.

"Put ya hains up."

"Fuck you. You know I don't have anything."

"Do it anyway."

"No."

Brin clued into something for the first time, and she wondered why she hadn't noticed it before. Her eyesight under the influence of the cubes was better than it had been before the accident. She'd needed light corrective glasses then, but everything she could see within the two cube bubble she was

in was crystal clear. She could see the sweat on their foreheads. She noticed a small scratch on Dale's neck.

And, she saw that he'd modified a leather watch band with Velcro, and there was a cube strapped within it on his wrist. Ray wore one as well. Knowing what the cubes did, she understood what this meant.

This was going to be an actual gun battle. Her heart dropped. Jake was fantastic with a bow, thanks in large part to her father, but she doubted he'd ever fired a gun in his life. She'd have to pin all her hopes on Bear, she thought.

She came even with Dale, and he put a hand on her shoulder and turned to face the alley mouth even as the sound of braking tires howled just outside the range of what she could see. She felt the hard press of the gun's muzzle against her temple, and Ray also turned, raising his rifle as a tan military vehicle screeched to a halt just inside her limited field of vision. She could see Bear up behind what looked like a machine gun on top of it, though he held a rifle to his shoulder instead of hands on the big gun. He was pointing it at Ray.

Nothing happened for about ten seconds. She could see movement behind the windshield, but the late-morning sun obscured it with glints of silver reflection.

Then, the passenger door opened, and Andrew got out. Jake was right behind him, holding a gun to his head.

