

Stranger in a Strange Land

Jeff stood where he was for a few minutes, holding the rifle at low ready out of habit, swaying slightly with the movement of the boat. He watched the burning craft dwindle aft as theirs raced away into full night across Dark Lake.

Then he slung the rifle across his back, and turned to look forward again. The two mountains throttling the center of the lake were back-lit by ambient star-light, and the peak on the left was surrounded with a white nimbus that seemed to indicate an imminent moon-rise, but for now the way forward was dim. He sighed, as memory overcame him. He knew he should return to the cabin below, but felt paralyzed by a flood from the past.

Once they'd beat the beast of his addiction back behind the flimsy door of his recovery, he and Sophia had spent several months attending to the needs of the businesses her uncle had left her. It had been a mixed bag of stress, joy, and uncertainty. Prior to her misadventures with him and the being she had named The Nightmare in the expanded world accessed through the derelict, she'd been mourning the recent loss of her uncle. She had been the sole beneficiary of his estate, which included the marina, and two liquor stores. Jeff had been a daily customer of one of them. The retrospective irony was not lost on either of them.

Dealing with personnel issues had been surprisingly easy. He'd watched Sophia expand and press in, and her problem employees had deferred to a person. He knew it had nothing to do with his presence

standing silently behind her, because not one of them looked at him during the necessary confrontations. They all knew who he was, and were probably mystified why he was there at all. It had everything to do with her knowledge that he was there.

He'd initially been able to pick up some warehouse shifts through a friend of his sponsor, but the money didn't seem to justify the time they had to spend apart. Sophia had made a half-hearted attempt to pick up where she'd left off at college, but had confided in him after only a few weeks that she really didn't see the point anymore.

"What are we doing? We have enough money. We need to figure out what our life looks like now, knowing what we know."

He'd conceded, and had quit soon after, taking over the part-time marina maintenance position from an older gentleman who had conveniently decided to retire. They'd both figured that Jeff's participation at either liquor store would be tempting fate.

Everything beyond the stabilization of their respective places in this new version of the world had been the topic of much discussion, and it didn't take long for both of them to realize that inputting old values did not compute.

He remembered the night it had crystallized for them, sitting out on the deck of her condo that overlooked the marina, a summer breeze blowing softly in off of the bay. She had grasped his hand without looking at him across the small wicker table, lit only by the yellow-white glow of the porch light.

"We can't look at the world with the same eyes anymore, right?"

He looked down at her hand, gripping his, then at the shadowed profile of her face. He gave it a few seconds before answering, but only because consideration seemed warranted, not because he wasn't already there himself.

"No, I don't think we can. You have ideas?"

She huffed impatiently, and squeezed his hand harder in irritation.

"Don't handle me. Of course I do. So do you. Stop acting like we haven't been trying to figure this out since day one."

"Ok."

The pressure of her grip eased, and her voice when she spoke next was even, and decisive.

"We need skills, you and I."

"Yes, we do." He agreed but didn't add, waiting.

"This world is occupied with its own problems. They think the list they can see is *the* list. The *entire* list. We know it isn't. Look, I know I'm not telling you anything you don't already realize, but we already saved their asses once, through sheer luck. I don't see that happening again. What if something worse than what we used to beat him is behind one of the black doors, and it gets out? They don't even know to be afraid."

He nodded, letting go of her hand to scratch an errant itch above his hair-line. He smiled to himself in the evening gloom.

"I'm going to go out on a limb here, and figure you have a plan?"

He could hear the triumph in her voice.

"Yep. And that beer gut is doomed."

"It's not a beer..."

"It's doomed."

It had begun then. They had enrolled in self-defense seminars, martial arts and hunter safety classes to begin with. Their progress had been slow, but steady, and they had both fed happily on each little triumph. As time passed, the obsession gained traction, and fire-arms training, concealed carry certification, and advanced versions of everything that had gone before became their life outside their life. At one point, about two years in, Sophia put a name to it.

They were doing a three-week survival training course in the mountains of Idaho, taught by two ragged-edge instructors whose energetic antagonism toward all things establishment made Jeff's contrarian humor start to seem potentially life threatening. He and Sophia were in their tent for the evening, and she was particularly anxious to leave.

"You know what this is, right, what we're doing?"

He put his arms around her, and squeezed as he spoke.

"I have an idea, but I'd prefer not to sound like an idiot. Tell me."

She didn't hesitate, as usual.

"This is super-hero training."

He frowned, as it was not what he'd been expecting.

"What?"

"Imagine if what happened to us last time had happened after we'd already done all this? Like our chances to fuck over the Nightmare sooner?"

He thought about it, but couldn't quite get there. He shook his head.

"We're not super-heroes."

"We're going to be."

"I'm going to have to speak with our insurance agent, then." He didn't know what else to say, so deflection seemed like the only option.

She shrugged against him, and her tone changed very slightly. He couldn't tell if it was a growing sleepiness, or deflation.

"You don't have to agree if you don't."

He'd let it go, but while he didn't agree with her nomenclature, the derelict still waited in slip fourteen. Invisible, but waiting there just the same.

He returned to the present with the thought of that desiccated craft clear in his mind. It was his new snapshot, a mental icon that defined a pinnacle in the through line of his life. He might be clean, but he was still an addict, and he was of the opinion that each addict had one. It had supplanted the original of he and his ex-wife on the house-boat a few weeks before their wedding day. He felt uneasy about that shift of focus. His first one had high-lighted a personal high point, but it hadn't been eclipsed by another of the same. He could think of a dozen moments with Sophia in an instant that trumped that day with Rachael on the house-boat, but none of them were the snapshot now.

It was just the derelict.

He thought, *and why not?*

Here he was again, having brought Sophia with him once more, to fulfill some dictate that he neither understood nor was given the opportunity to sign off on, working and risking on behalf of a controlling interest who saw him and his wife as tools.

He shook his head as mist from the bow chop blew against his face. Shrugging off any more contemplation, he made his way towards the stern again, finally descending the ladder to the rear deck. The upper half of the unopened door to the salon was shattered, but he could see his wife, Priest, and Orela within, all in the same places they'd been when he left. They were all fine at first glance, and his pulse slowed a bit. Orela was awake and sitting up, looking at the other two from her place at the small table behind the captain's chair.

He entered the open door as Sophia asked,

"So that's your plan, then?"

He could hear in her voice that special tone that she reserved only for the most moronic of ideas. He was quite familiar with it. It was intended to lull the possessor of such idiocy (typically himself) into a false sense of confidence, before she fully dismantled the idea with violent logic and malice aforethought. He grinned, heading for the table where Orela sat.

Priest fell head-long into the trap.

"It's protocol. I said, you can't dock at Dark Gap without papers or money."

Sophia sighed, shaking her head slightly. Jeff sat down at the table and shrugged the rifle and strap off of his shoulder, leaning it

upright against the backrest next to him. He put his arm around Orela, the both of them watching the current exchange silently. She snuggled herself against him without looking away from the conversation.

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