

We'll Meet Again: A Monument One-shot

1

James did not spend his last night with Jessica sleeping. They enjoyed every moment to its fullest extent until the night's pleasures had exhausted both of them and they collapsed into the receding darkness.

The couple were dragged from the enveloping grasp of sleep by the 6 o'clock alarm that rang outside their building. The usually insistent if tiresome bell seemed to have become a head-splitting noise that drove them to seek comfort in each other. James slipped an arm around Jessica's back and drew her closely, she buried the side of her face into his neck and shoulder, and they both looked toward the popcorn ceiling for patterns, for answers, for things left un contemplated.

The day loomed like a long shadow cast from a doorway. A silent anxiety prevailed the two of them. They clung tighter, staring upward in thought. There were a million ways to connect the ceiling's kernels into a million diverse images, yet it was home only to a hundred peppered stars and a crescent moon applied with glow-in-the-dark paint that appeared a deathly pale green in the light that seeped through their window.

This was their final hour to themselves. They spent it in silence, heartbeats close, memorizing the rhythm and tune of one another's breath, the temperature and sensation of their embrace, so they could think back to the other's presence when their days apart seemed withered.

Nothing was said until James's wristwatch chirped among the covers, indicative of the hour's passing. He retrieved it, clicked it off, and set it on the nightstand, whispering halfheartedly, "It's time, Jess."

They rose wordlessly and gathered the scattered articles of clothing to toss in the laundry hamper before showering together—as much for the preservation of water as the company they provided each other, James supposed. He finished first, drying then wrapping a towel around himself so no one could see him indecent as he looked through the window. He placed a hand on the cool glass, tracing the eastern skyline which was silhouetted by the rising sun. Even from the third story apartment complex, which offered a good view of the community, it was difficult to grasp how large a city of a mere three hundred people were in these times. If James squinted, through the sun's glare and the rise of intrusive buildings, he could just make out the eastern section of the wall over two blocks away.

James stopped admiring the skyline, as he felt it was just another attempt to delay the inevitable, and got started on getting dressed. He raided a wooden dresser set into an alcove in the wall. It was filled with differing gear for their separate excursions. He spread a lot of it out across the room, on the bed, on the floor. Jessica joined him as he was buttoning up a thick pair of cargo pants and they began dressing together.

In a matter of twenty minutes, James had dressed his tall figure in heavy cargo pants and a brown flannel shirt interlaced by a latticework of gray lines, and adorned himself with an empty holster attached to his belt, a strap that wrapped around his chest and a sheath that buckled around his thigh. Jessica dressed her smaller frame in similar fashion—red-and-black flannel, cargo pants, various straps and holsters. They laced their boots and pulled on light jackets, leaving them open—his was gray with blue and white designs, hers was blue and decorated with black. They put on gloves last.

His last action before following Jessica out the door was strapping the watch to his wrist, which displayed the sobering digits 07:33. He closed the door behind him and followed her down a brief hall. She almost seemed ghostly in the dim light, moving with an unnatural grace in the heavy boots. Instead of descending the stairwell, they ascended another level, then up the remaining stairs that led to the roof.

James stepped out after Jessica onto the rooftop garden, a thousand green leaves shivering in the cool breeze, set in the foreground of the rising sun. They gathered a modest amount of vegetables from their building's community garden, sat on the edge of the two-foot wall that wrapped around the rooftop, and ate a quick meal of fresh, ripe greens along with some jerky and cheese that they had brought with them.

When they'd finished their meal, she rested her head on his shoulder and they both became very still and very quiet, enjoying the last minutes of solitude. For a moment, James believed she was asleep and was afraid that he would let her sleep, even as their transport pulled to the side of the road far below them.

She took his hand in hers and that thought dissolved. She grimaced, but the corners of her mouth were also upturned in a half smile of conflicted emotions. "There's a long road ahead of us," she mumbled.

He didn't respond. Instead, he held her tighter. The tides of responsibility rose in him, tides of grim resolve. They both had a job to do. In the past, they'd always done that job to the fullest of their abilities. They weren't the best, but they were close.

They would do their job.

"Don't worry," she whispered, nestling her face into his chest and smiling fully, managing to nudge a smile out of him. "We'll meet again."

He repeated her words softly and they were lost to the wind.

2

Their plunge downstairs was quick and unhalting. Jessica descended with the noiseless qualities of a spectre. James followed closely behind, fascinated, focusing more on her movements than his own, nearly missing a step more than once due to his absent train of thought. Her steps were a muffled tapping off-kilter with his loud footfalls, their echoless properties causing his skin to prickle with goosebumps.

The tank-like humvee waited for them by the curb. As they approached, the back door facing them was swung open by Vincent Hale, who returned to his seat while greeting them with a subdued but inviting gesture. They clambered in, James shut the door, and the humvee moved.

"Big day today, huh?" James said, settling in by the door.

Vincent nodded gloomily, the sad look on his face perpetual, giving Jessica a unenthusiastic high-five without comment when she beckoned with a raised and open hand. He shook hands with James.

"How's the east looking today?" Vincent asked softly as the humvee took a turn. The lobby-levels of Springs's tallest buildings drifted outside the window, then the skyline began to shorten in size as they progressed.

"Sunny with a few clouds," Jessica replied.

"You look south recently?" James asked.

"Yeah. Just clouds." He glanced out his window, as if double checking, without twisting his neck. "Some of them are dark, though. I dunno how it'll be crosscountry."

"I guess we'll find out together, Vince," James said. Forgetting himself, he smiled momentarily.

Vincent puffed air through his nose in lieu of any other outward sign of amusement. "For a time," he agreed. He was correct. They would be splitting up in New Mexico.

James watched the last of the tall buildings recede with a dim reverence when he realized he wouldn't see them again for a long time. The largest could house every member of the community, but instead the populace was thinly spread over a great many cells—an understandable decision with its own drawbacks. Each cell—like their apartment complex, which was capable of producing the majority of their diet through rooftop gardens and gathering their own water through rain collection. Maintaining such a large number of buildings was the main downside alongside many smaller difficulties.

But James thought it was an interesting factoid about their community. Separately, they were builders, bureaucrats, farmers, guards, planners, plumbers, scouts, smiths, soldiers, and technicians. Some individuals laid claim to multiple titles. Some of them were employed by their government while others worked privately or commercially. Some provided nothing more than recreational services, which was strange given the circumstances. But all of them, in some capacity, were gardeners.

It was also a place of many names. He preferred its straightforward and pre-apocalypse title of Colorado Springs. Springs if one wanted to be brief. A minority of people had taken to calling it Fountain, like the Fountain of Youth and/or the Fountain of Life. An even smaller, possibly even more romantic minority called it the City of Gardeners.

James lost this train of thought when the humvee turned the corner and the massive wall filled the windshield.

3

The humvee rolled to a stop in front of the monolithic wall and gate which towered in front of it. The wall spread across the street and between two multi-story buildings. It extended skyward twenty feet, where a one-foot concrete lip jutted outward on both sides. A wooden frame threw the lip out an additional two feet, and upon that rested a wooden, roofed walkway that connected to both buildings by way of an entrance. Beams required for reinforcement and stability were suspended diagonally between platform and wall. The walkway added another eight feet to the wall's height for a grand total of twenty-eight feet.

Two people of indeterminate sex, armed with automatic rifles and dressed in heavy clothing, stood guard upon the walkway. Their attention was glued to the vast area outside. On interior side of the wall, there was a cabin set in the center of the former highway. The three of them sat quietly in the backseat while a guard leaned out of the checkpoint's open window and conferred with their driver.

The sight either afflicted an immediate reaction of awe or, for those who had worn of that effect, a

response that strangely bordered on respect. For James, frequent trips to and fro the community on scouting and scavenging excursions had dampened the former effect. He had fallen into the latter category. Whether that respect lied with the craftsmen who constructed such a behemoth or, oddly, with the wall itself, he did not know. Now, however, it instilled an unusual reaction in him, not felt since his first excursion beyond it, which was anxiety.

The fear manifested as a sickly tightening in his stomach and he felt a frustrated moan preparing to leave his throat. He didn't realize he'd taken Jessica's hand until she squeezed it soothingly, and that settled him.

The driver's brief exchange with the guard came to an end. The guard at the checkpoint turned a key, pressed a button. There was a rotary whine, the outbound gate swung slowly outward, and the guard waved the humvee through.

The humvee bucked once, then twice on its way over the flat metal hump and ramp that ran the length of the threshold. From there, it was smooth sailing down a well-maintained, six-lane highway, the emptiness of which was unsettling. James resisted the urge to watch the receding community, whether it would have turned him into pillar of salt or not.

But Vincent watched. Once the wall had slowly fallen out of view, he turned back and met James's eyes. His expression didn't seem a degree graver than it already did. Not for the first time and not for the last, James wondered what had imbrued those eyes with melancholy.

Vincent was among the fourth batch of survivors to arrive at the then blossoming community. James and Jessica were both sevenths, arriving mere days apart. Batches were simply determined by month. The current month's new arrivals—part of the ninth batch—was a grand total of two. Those two had been brought in by Vincent a week ago and were now being integrated into the community. That number stood in stark contrast to the previous month's eighteen. James had contributed six that month.

"There's no going back now," Vincent whispered, interrupting James's thoughts unexpectedly. "Got any misgivings to speak of?"

"I'm a-okay," Jessica lied.

"I'm alright," James lied as well.

The truth was transparent. Vincent nodded, then smiled unpleasantly—it didn't mix well with the discolored scar that slashed across his fading laughlines. "That's fortunate," he whispered, looking out the window. "Me, I'm not so sure."

4

They reached outer perimeter of Fort Carson after a few minutes of driving. It was mostly constructed from a ten-foot-tall chain link fence—interspersed with wooden support struts and a concrete border which filled the gap beneath the fence—and the structures of many pre-existing buildings, encompassing a large portion of the surrounding neighborhoods. It was far more simple than the main community's setup, but was nonetheless adequate.

Upon arriving at the preliminary gate, an armed guard stationed within rolled open the chain link gate by hand, waving the humvee before pushing it shut behind them. They left the public road a moment later and arrived at the fort's entrance. Their driver once again conferred with the guard outside, and this one simply pushed a button from inside his booth, allowing entry into the compound.

They made a brief stop by the eastside storeroom where they picked up backpacks filled to the brim with pre-requisitioned rations. Finished, the humvee pushed into the busier sections of the base on its way to the armory. Once there, each of them filled the empty holster on their waist with a pistol, the sheath on their thigh with a knife, and the harness around their chest with a spare pistol, extra magazines and ammunition. James took with him an automatic rifle that he would mostly tout on a sling when traveling and Vincent requisitioned his personal sniper rifle from storage. Jessica packed along no additional firepower besides a spare pistol, despite James's insistence she should. She replied that it would be deadweight. James couldn't argue.

With the three of them fully equipped for the extended excursions, they left the building to find a second humvee had already pulled up behind the one they'd rode in on.

Our paths split, James thought bitterly.

The couple took each other's hands and gripped fiercely while Vincent walked off to the new humvee to allow the two of them some privacy before their imminent, and possibly permanent, departure. Vincent made absentminded adjustments to his rifle, checked its safety, and generally kept himself occupied, his expression strangely like that of a man handling something vile.

Both hands held, facing each other, Jessica stood on her tiptoes to plant a kiss on his lips. She pulled back slowly to look at his face, running a gloved hand from his ear, over his jawline, and stopped at his chin. Tears were welling in both of their eyes. They embraced simultaneously. She whispered her hopeful mantra, and then she withdrew toward the first humvee.

She paused there, smiling as the wind blew her hair across her face, a glove on the door handle.

He matched her sad smile. Tears formed reflective fractures on his pained face, then she was eastbound.

5

James and Vincent's humvee drove them about eighty miles south of Colorado Springs, to a small town called Walsenburg, where the last safehouse in that direction was located. It was four in the afternoon upon their arrival. This was where they would begin their long journey together to the border, and from there, Vincent would diverge to a southwest heading and James would continue straight south on his own.

James was unsure and conflicted. He didn't want to be alone. But knew the choice he'd made. And turning back just wouldn't suit him.

He'd go south to the border, to the Rio Grande, to Mexico, to see the ruins of a dead and at times still dying world, to maybe find decent people who, too, lingered in a world that had moved past them and onto a new era. He recognized and dreaded the possibility of utter failure, of death, of a fate worse than death, and whatever really awaited him. And he wondered—neither hopeful nor unhopeful, but with

curiosity—what the others would learn in a nation as large as America, what secrets they would find, and what he himself would discover in the south.

Setting Sail, Coming Home