

Chapter 1 The Bear

In a beautiful pine forest in the mountains between Switzerland and Austria, two US soldiers are out on reconnaissance with orders to look for camps of survivors, armed militia, or enemy troops and report what they find. Avoid engagement, just observe and report back. Due to the altitude and steep terrain, they were camouflaged and traveling light.

It had been a couple of years after what most survivors called "The Fall", short for the fall of civilization. Volcanoes went off around the world, the poles shifted, much of the US, Europe, and Japan went underwater, some islands in the Atlantic and Pacific oceans rose up and civilization, as we knew it, ended. Tsunamis, volcanos, and earthquakes killed hundreds of millions in a week. Rioting, fighting for scarce food supplies, and famine in the years since, claimed millions more.

Above the valley, the two soldiers made their way along the steep wooded sidehill on a game trail used mostly by goats.

The pleasant mid-morning spring chorus of birds was broken when a big animal let loose a mighty bellow somewhere up the trail. They looked at each other as the sound of furious grunting and digging began further down the game trail. They scrambled behind two uphill pines, took their M-16s off safety, tried to blend in, and waited in full alert.

Seconds later, an angry bear charged howling down the game trail in their direction.

"Damn!" Thought the Sargent. "Don't attract attention, no unnecessary shots. They didn't plan for this!" In the seconds before contact, his mind raced to a movie he saw as a kid where a bear mauled a man and nearly killed him. He drew a deep breath and grit his teeth as his finger tightened on the trigger.

The bawling bear barreled down the trail and seemed not to see them. Both sighed and clicked their safeties back on. They reminded hidden until they were sure no other surprises were coming and the bear was gone. Cautiously, they continued down the narrow game trail. A little ahead, just off the trail was a 30-centimeter vertical gap in the gray rock of an overhang where the bear had obviously been digging. One soldier got down and shined a light into the crack. Hidden deep inside the crevice, was a young girl.

He turned to his companion and said;

"We got a local, female, possibly injured by the bear. None of this was in the plan..."

"Tell me about it. Motion her out and we'll see if we can help her. Find out what she speaks.."

"I speak English quite well", came a voice from deep in the narrow crevice.

"Are you injured? Did the bear chew you up?"

"No. She was angry, but I got into hiding before she could vent. I'm fine, just a little stuck."

"Do you need help getting out?"

"Ahh, no. Just a minute." The girl pushed her backpack deeper into the crevice with her foot and began to crawl out. Once she dragged herself out of the narrow crevice, the questions started.

"Who are you with and how do you speak such good English?"

"Well, I grew up in America and was living in Europe when The Fall happened. I was stuck without a ride home. Not that there was much of a home left to go back to."

"Speak any of the local dialects?"

"Oh yes, many. I learned proper German first so I could navigate the different variations of it. When the Euro-tsunami and flooding of northern Germany started, I escaped Berlin and walked to Munich, but they weren't too welcoming if you know what I mean."

"Are you alone?"

"Now? Yes." The two soldiers noticed that the girl's eyes nervously shifted back and forth between them. The girl continued; "We better be going."

"Yeah? And whys that?"

"It will be dark soon, you're not spending the night here, and there's no telling if, or when, that bear is coming back. Any more questions you have can be answered around the fire later."

With that, the girl headed off down the game trail opposite the direction the bear had gone. The two soldiers looked at each other, looked down the trail in the direction the bear had run, shrugged, and turned to follow their new guide. The game trail soon forked and one trail headed up a narrow ravine. Pointing up the ravine, the girl said; "Up there it flattens out and there is a spring where we can get fresh water. OK?" The two soldiers nodded and they soon found themselves in a sparsely wooded clearing with a small spring-fed pond in one corner. The girl had them pitch their tents as far from the water as they could and they soon found out why. As they got the fire started, all manner of high mountain animals came to the pond for their nightly drink; ibex, chamois, deer, fox, and fortunately no bears.

"So you know your way around the mountains pretty good. Why do you live alone in the woods?"

"I lost everything when Berlin flooded and got evacuated to the refugee camps near Munich. Ever read Hemingway's "A Farewell to Arms"?"

"No. Never got a chance. Why?"

"An American joins the Italian army in the First World War as an officer in charge of ambulances in south Tirol, evacuating wounded out of mountainous regions much like this one. Sounded safe enough, but he almost got executed by the Italian Military Police after a disastrous retreat because they didn't like his Italian accent. Although that was over one hundred years ago, not much has changed. If you are from somewhere else, you're not welcome. When The Fall came, money was worthless, you couldn't buy food and starving people were getting hung for stealing apples off of trees. It was really bad for a while. Even though I spoke good German, I figured I was better off eating pine nuts and berries in the mountains. The winters warmed up nice and it hasn't been too bad."

"Want some rations?"

"Ahh, no thanks, I don't think my stomach would appreciate that."

"What do you know about other survivors and armed militias?"

"I know about the militia centers, I know to stay away."

"Yeah, who knew the Swiss had so many guns?"

"Well, everyone in Europe...?" They all laughed. As it turned out, the "peace-loving Swiss" loved their guns as much as Americans and formed armed militias to protect themselves after The Fall. The Sargent asked;

"You know the US took over the airport at Bodensee, don't you?"

"Yes, I saw. Another place to avoid."

"Since you know so much about this area, we're taking you back there for a debriefing. There is a lot you can tell us about what's happening on the ground."

"Ok. But there are things I saw, experienced before The Fall that may have more value than that..."

"Yeah? Like what?"

"Like how people evolved. Escaped. Avoided The Fall entirely because they simply moved past the need to be here. They evolved past the need to experience fear, hunger, pain suffering, even... this", she gestured to the natural beauty around them.

"When you say "they evolved", where did they go? Where did they escape to?"

"You might call it another dimension, a higher vibrational reality, heaven... Many names for the same phenomena, same place."

The girl put another piece of dry wood on the fire, a light glowing from her as they listened. The forest went silent.

"And I know how they got there. It all began in Berlin....."

