

The Junk Town Blues

Lyle Garford

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ISBN

Cover Art by Rowan M. Davis
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First Edition 2014
Printed by CreateSpace, An Amazon.com Company
Available on Kindle and other devices

Dedication

This one is for my mother, who was a proud stick bug Mom.

LT Garford

Chapter One

The two young wolves paused to sniff at the wind in wary silence. Until now they had been padding along soft and quiet, trying to stay undetected as long as possible. Travelling in the low undergrowth of the forest had worked well to this point, keeping them hidden longer than they thought possible. With a quick look at each other they congratulated themselves on getting this close to the border of Junk Town without the alarm being raised.

"And they thought we couldn't do it," said the older of the two wolves. "We won't be going hungry tonight, buddy."

"I think we should grab as much as we can carry and have a feast right in front of the pack," replied the other with an evil grin.

Neither would admit a little worm of doubt ate at both of them, though. The older wolves in their pack were all wary of Junk Town, far too much in the opinion of the two young wolves. Home to a host of pet animals abandoned by humans, Junk Town was still a tempting target for hungry predators. But their pack leader Scar had seen the young wolves bravery and desire, so he gave them permission to try an attack.

They hadn't expected to get his approval. Although surprised and a bit puzzled at Scar's support, the two young and aggressive wolves spent little time wondering about it and continued to be scornful in private of the older wolves they thought were too timid. Bringing some fresh prey back from Junk Town was the surest way to prove it. But doubt still ate at them. What if the older wolves were right?

The older lead wolf shrugged off his doubts. "Come on, let's get a little closer if we can before we rush them."

Peering with hungry eyes through the thinning brush it was clear staying concealed couldn't last much longer. Once past the old fence on the border the fringe of trees and brush surrounding the edges of Junk Town was disappearing, with only a few trees and shrubs to provide cover from this point on. As they

got even closer they stopped worrying about losing their cover, however. Of much more interest was the sight of prey, so many that the hungry wolves began salivating in anticipation.

"Look over there, Slash!" said the lead wolf.

In the distance was a strange collection of little homes put together from a crazy assortment of materials stretching all the way from a beat up old trailer at one end of the property to a little barn standing alone at the other end. It was like someone had taken a dozen giant jigsaw puzzles, jumbled them up at random, and put it all back together with a basic sense of order. A deep stream cut through the heart of Junk Town, complete with a few little bridges to help cross over. However, the inhabitants of Junk Town were what interested the wolves.

A wide assortment of creatures bustled about with purpose everywhere they went. Dogs, cats, and rats were plentiful, and best of all, there was a whole host of plump, tasty looking rabbits! Several were laboring in the fields surrounding Junk Town, tending to crops of carrots and lettuce just beginning to sprout in the Spring sunshine.

"They're going to be so jealous when we bring back a bunch of these rabbits. Look at how fat they are!" said Slash, salivating even more at the prospect. Baring his fangs in a savage grin he nodded in silence in the direction of the nearest field filled with rabbit

workers. "This is as close as we're going to get without being seen. Are you ready?"

The other wolf grinned and nodded in reply. Bursting from their cover as one the wolves barreled forward in a headlong rush.

The rabbits at work in the field were focused on their work and had no idea of the dire threat coming their way. The confidence of the attackers soared ever higher the closer they got without their presence being detected. Then, sensing something wrong, a rabbit twitched alert and looked around. Glancing in their direction he froze for a brief moment in shock before sounding the alarm. The field rabbits twitched in fear as they grasped the danger and they scattered in all directions running hard to escape.

The need for stealth was gone, replaced by the joy of the hunt. "Get them, Slash!" howled the lead wolf.

His howl of victory changed almost instantly to a howl of surprise. A thin, cleverly hidden trip wire strung across his path made him stumble as the wire triggered the trap with a loud snap. The two wolves were shocked as they crashed together and were abruptly pulled off their feet. Struggling to understand what was happening, they both howled in frustration and fear, but their struggles got them nowhere. The big net swinging wildly back and forth in the air held the two wolves fast.

The rabbit engineers of Junk Town had laid their trap well. A big old fishing net salvaged from the junkyard and camouflaged on the ground held the two struggling wolves firm in its grasp. Thoughts of trying to chew through the net were immediately dismissed by the frustrated wolves, as the netting was far too thick.

Still howling in frustration and fear, there was little they could do but await their fate. A small, wary crowd of Junk Town animals soon gathered to gawk at the captured wolves. Many hung back, on edge and ready to run at a moments notice. Being this close to wolves, even ones thoroughly trapped like these, was a frightening thought for many.

A small group of the bolder young rats were the exception. "Look at these idiots!" laughed one of them, making the wolves snarl in frustration. Slash managed to get a paw through one of the rings in the net and began slashing the air wildly in their direction.

"Stop that, you fool!" shouted his partner. "You're making me sick from all this motion."

The sick look on his face just made the rats laugh even louder as the net wildly swayed back and forth. They moved aside though, still laughing, as two new animals made their way through to the front of the crowd. The wolves could see the rest of the watching animals were respectful of the newcomers and were clearly expecting them to take action.

The two animals seemed an odd pair on the surface. The first was a rabbit, clearly a leader bearing the quiet air of command. Today he seemed curious and puzzled as he focused on the still trapped wolves swaying in the net in front of him.

The other was a strange looking bug, quite a bit smaller than his partner. But like all stick bugs, he had a wiry strength that wasn't apparent at first. Glaring at the trapped wolves, the stick bug shook his head in frustration and turned to his partner.

"Well, that's the third time this month and the month isn't even half over, Twitch. What is it with them, anyway? They came after us only twice in all of the last month. You think they're getting more active because it's Spring?"

Twitch the rabbit shrugged. "Could be, Sticks. Mind you, those two attacks last month were towards the end, weren't they? At least they aren't getting any smarter. Our traps have got them every time."

"Huh," replied Sticks, a concerned look growing on his face. "These two look like young rookies. I'm just not sure why they're here so soon. I think they're either just rogues that couldn't wait for Scar to stir himself to action again or maybe this is part of some larger plot on the part of Scar."

"A plot? To do what? You think he's that smart, Sticks?"

"Don't know. We beat him before, but it might just be he's adapting. Or maybe he's just plotting something different. I don't like this."

That thought gave both of them pause, bringing back memories from the year before. Sticks and his family were grateful to make a new home for themselves in Junk Town after being unceremoniously abandoned in the forest by their former owner just as winter was approaching. The memory of the shocking loss of his father and grandfather in a flood during their struggle to reach Junk Town had faded, but was still painful.

The burden of leading the family fell to Sticks. They soon found they liked Junk Town and its inhabitants, but attacks by predators meant life was not easy. With the help of the old human and Stuff the bear the predators had been kept at bay. The predator's fortunes changed when Stuff was captured and taken away by humans. Worse, soon after that the old human passed away.

Sticks rose to the challenge. Leading the Junk Town animals in a desperate defense of their home against a massive combined attack from the wolves and crows, Sticks had handed their enemies a crushing defeat.

For the first few months after as fall changed to winter there were no attacks, but then they began again. Twitch and his engineer rabbits worked overtime to

construct a new series of defenses and traps like the one that caught the two wolves still snarling at them in frustration. So far, at least, the defenses had worked.

This time Sticks was reacting differently though, and Twitch looked hard at Sticks. "You know, I've been around you long enough now I can tell when you've got something on your mind. Come on, out with it. What's up?"

"Okay, you got me," said Sticks, with deliberate slowness, lowering his voice so the two wolves couldn't hear him. "I'd like to think they don't know what they're doing, but that would presume too much. So just keep looking at these two idiots for the moment, because I don't want to give away the game. There's a crow hidden in those trees off to our right watching all of this. He's being very careful to ensure he isn't seen and I don't think it's a coincidence he's there. I was lucky to spot him out of the corner of my eye when he shifted his position. So I figure we have to err on the safe side and assume this is part of a larger plan."

"Hmm, yes, I agree," replied Twitch. "So where do we go from here?"

"We give that some thought and talk it over later."

"Sure. What do you want to do with these two?"

Smiling, Sticks raised his voice so the wolves could hear him again. "Well, we could round up everyone and shove them out of town with the pointy end of our spears, but Stuff is coming by this evening to hang out

at the fire with us. I'm sure he'd be happy to explain to these two fools why it's a bad idea to come after us."

Twitch laughed as the two wolves cringed at the mention of Stuff. The fearsome young bear had wandered into Junk Town with an injured paw the year before and the old human had helped to heal it. Orphaned by hunters, he had adopted Junk Town and its residents as his new family. The wolves had soon learned it was a bad mistake to come after any of the residents while he was around.

That was before he was captured and tagged by animal control officers because they thought he was a 'garbage bear', too used to looking for food in garbage cans. Stuff had found himself hauled off into the deep forest and released. After weary days of travelling he got back just in time to help defeat the predators in the Battle of Junk Town. Since then he had mostly kept a wary distance from Junk Town. If the humans caught him near the city again he would be put down.

With the tag the humans had attached to his ear still in place there was no other choice. Twitch and his rabbit engineers had tried to get it off without injuring the bear several times, but it had so far defeated every attempt. This meant Stuff was forced to vary his visits to Junk Town with an irregular schedule and to not stay for very long when he did.

"Ah," said Twitch, after he'd stopped laughing at the wolves. "I didn't know Stuff was coming by

tonight, but I'm glad he is. I'm told my engineers have dreamed up another way to get that thing off of him, so maybe they can try it tonight."

"Excellent. And in the meantime, these two can just hang here and consider the error of their ways. But what do you think? Will that net hold them that long?"

"Oh yes," replied Twitch. "They made sure the nets were as strong as could be."

Slash, more aggressive than the other wolf and still angry at being trapped, had been growling and trying once again to get a paw far enough out of the net to claw at the two animals in front of him. Sticks smiled and addressed the wolf directly.

"Hey, ugly. Yeah, that's you. Tell your boss Scar he's wasting his time. As for you two, don't come back. We may not be so nice next time."

Turning, both animals left as the two wolves growled in frustration, still swaying back and forth in the net from their struggles.

Now that warmer spring weather had come a big fire wasn't needed, but everyone enjoyed watching the endless shapes of the flames shift as they fought back the night. The crowd gathered that night had fed well on their stored supplies, but many were looking forward to having fresh crops as the year wore on. For

the most part it was a content and happy group around the fire.

Stuff the bear had indeed appeared for dinner as promised. His presence immediately cheered everyone and it wasn't just because he brought guaranteed safety from attack. The Junk Town animals genuinely enjoyed the cheerful young bear and they all knew he felt the same way about them.

When told about the two wolves still hanging trapped in the net he had growled deep in his throat and turned to find them. Sticks stopped him briefly and smiled. "Just the usual, Stuff. No need to beat them up."

"Leave it to me," growled the bear over his shoulder as he stalked over to them. A large crowd of the Junk Town children eager to watch their enemies humbled followed along.

The wolves in the net cringed and tried to shrink away seeing the big bear coming to stand before them. Stuff simply glared at them for a long minute before putting his snout close the net. No one could hear what he said, but the hard, menacing undertone in his voice was crystal clear.

With sudden, stunning speed the bear cut open a large chunk of the net holding the wolves fast. The wolves howled in fear and terror as they crashed hard to the ground in front of Stuff. Their howls were cut

short as Stuff roared in anger and swatted both of them hard.

The Junk Town children rolled on the ground laughing as the two wolves stumbled and struggled to get out of the net still tangling them. Both got free at the same time and ran hard for the safety of the trees. Realizing Stuff wasn't chasing them the older wolf paused at the tree line and looked back. Stuff just glared back at him and growled. The wolf bared his fangs in a grim, mocking smile and disappeared into the woods.

Back at the fire several animals thanked Stuff for dealing with the wolves. Stuff gave them a sad smile in return.

"What's wrong, Stuff?" asked one of the rabbits sitting by the fire.

The bear took a moment to reply, sitting down beside the rabbit and making himself comfortable. "Ah, I'm just wishing I could be here to help more. I miss all you guys and it feels personal every time you get attacked. You wouldn't need to live in fear or have to put up all these defenses and traps if I could stay here with you."

"Well, I have news, Stuff," said Twitch. "The boys want to have another go at getting that tag off you tonight. With any luck you'll be able to rejoin us."

"That would be great Twitch!" replied Stuff, a hopeful look on his face. "I'm ready whenever they are."

Several animals voiced their support and hope it would work, but Sticks was noticeably quiet. Stick's sister Leaf knew him well and could see he had something on his mind. "What are you thinking, dear brother? Come on, I can see you've got something to say."

Sticks grimaced as he saw many animals turn to hear his response. "Yeah," he finally replied. "I'd prefer I had something positive to say about this, though. I'm afraid I don't."

"What do you mean?"

"Ah, well, I've been thinking about this for some time. We've all been focused on finding a way to get this tag off his ear, right?"

Seeing nods from the crowd of animals around the fire he continued. "We all figured we'd be safe once and for all if that happened and Stuff could live here again with us. And yes, that would be great for all of us that need protection. What about Stuff, though? The reason he got hauled away is Junk Town is too close to the city and the humans are afraid of him. I don't know, I guess I'm just afraid it could happen again. And I don't know about any of you, but I don't want to watch my friend Stuff get hauled off in a cage again."

The look of gloom appearing on the faces of the animals as the implications of what he'd said sunk in told him he was right. Several of the animals groaned and nodded in agreement.

Stuff put on a brave face. "I'm willing to take that risk. With the junk yard closed there aren't any humans coming around here any more."

"That's true, Stuff, but how long will that last?" replied Sticks. "I don't know, I just can't see the humans leaving this place the way it is. Maybe someone will move in and take over the business? Who knows?"

"Wow," said Leaf. "You're just full of cheery thoughts tonight, aren't you?"

Sticks grimaced and shrugged his shoulders. Finally forcing a smile, he looked around at the gathered animals. "Sorry. You asked. Well, there's not much we can do about this tonight. Let's eat."