

The Bridge

by cully perlman

The Bridge

Barstow had not wanted to listen to Griff. Griff was not making the right decisions, or he thought Griff was not making the right decisions. Thought he was walking a perilously fine line when it came to his duty, watching, waiting, doing what suited only him. Using the Negro excuse to hide away, wait the war out. Maybe he was, maybe he wasn't. But Barstow knew what he did not know. He did not know what Griff knew. When it came to where they were, Griff knew a lot more than he did. Barstow did not like that Griff had that on him.

"Just up ways," he said. "Past that river bend."

It had taken some convincing to persuade Griff to leave the shack. Barstow knew Griff knew the lay of the land more than he had led on over the first few days. Griff had not wanted to leave; the shack had been his home for a long time and he had grown comfortable. It did not seem to matter to Griff, the old man at the shack speaking a language he could not understand, yelling at him, looking like he might slit Griff's throat. The old man fed him and gave him wine and treated him well. Griff knew and Barstow knew that the looks meant nothing. The looks were for show. I could stay here for the whole war, he told Barstow. Tell the truth, maybe I will.

Over the river a damaged bridge that fell away maybe thirty feet to fast running water and rock. A few miles beyond the bridge black smoke thinned gray. He could not tell if the smoke was from a small fire close up or a larger fire farther on. He looked at Griff. Griff watched the smoke.

"Tell me again what's over there."

"Brits," he said. "About a month they been over there."

"And you're sure about that?"

"Sure," he said. "I seen supplies rolling that way too."

Barstow looked at the bridge. It was not a very long bridge, but it was long enough. You did not want to get caught

walking along the bridge. You did not want to sneeze on that bridge really.

Griff looked at Barstow. "It ain't going to fall," he said.

"Drive a truck over it."

"How do you know?"

"I know."

"You're sure? About the Brits?"

"Yep."

"And the supplies?"

"Yep."

Barstow held the Browning HP the Frenchman had tucked into his hand when they were setting out. *Bon chance*, he had said. He tucked the Browning into his belt.

Griff started across the bridge. He walked ten feet, staying near one side, crossing over what looked like railroad ties someone had secured with chain and solder. The wind blew strong for a second and Griff stopped in his tracks and turned around, walked back.

"You go first," he said.

"What?"

"This is your mission. You go first."

"You're the guide," he said. "You've been here."

"Times change," he said. "I been here. Don't mean nothing right now."

"What?"

"I ain't been here the whole time. Month back, Cap. Things change."

"You're making me nervous," he said. "I don't like feeling squirrely."

"It ain't me making you feel that, Cap."

He wanted to tell Griff not to call him that.

"Listen. I'll go with you. But I ain't heading out there first. I never wanted to come."

"I didn't drag you."

"Yea you did."

"I'll go first," he said. "Anything happens, I'll kill you."

Griff nodded.

Barstow felt the Browning. He stepped onto the bridge. Griff was humming. Barstow felt the bridge below his feet swaying, but not too much.

"Funny thing, ain't it?"

"What?"

"All of this here. You. Me."

Barstow looked back at Griff. Griff was kneeling down by where the bridge met land. The bridge left a shadow over Griff. His face was very dark, even now in the day. Barstow kept walking, feeling each step heavily.

"I don't see the humor," he said.

"Oh, there's humor, Cap. There's humor." Griff was lighting a cigarette, cupping the flame against the wind, watching Barstow, watching the trees beyond the bridge, listening to anything he could hear in the distance. His eyes black against black skin. There was nothing to hear.

He said, "Don't feel good, does it?"

"What?"

"Walking cross that bridge first. Not knowing which side's got more trouble for you."

Barstow looked at Griff. Griff was smiling. He shook his head, waved Barstow on.

"Go on, now," he said.

Barstow had grown used to Griff's strangeness, but he had never known a negro before and didn't know if he could read Griff like maybe he could read other men.

The noise from the river grew louder the farther out he went. Griff was not yelling now, but soon he would have to. When Griff was silent all he could hear was the river and the bridge creaking.

Barstow approached the middle of the bridge. He turned back and looked at Griff. Griff made a movement like he was going to do something, cut the bridge or make it rock, make it sway.

Something. Or at least Barstow thought that's what it looked like. Barstow put his hand on the Browning.

"I know, Cap," Griff was yelling now, hands in the air, surrendering to the bridge, grinning, his voice deep as a trombone. "You'll kill me, you'll kill me. I know." Playing. Showing the Browning he had tucked into his own belt. Letting Barstow know everyone's got guns. Letting him know his gun was no different than Barstow's gun. That a black gun would cause the same hurt as a white gun. Didn't matter who shot the gun. If it shot, it shot.

Barstow turned back, kept walking, holding on to the railing. The wind grew stronger and the bridge swayed a little but nothing made him any more nervous. When he was a few feet from land he felt the bridge move and looked back. Griff was on the bridge now, but it could not have been him that made the bridge move. It was just the bridge settling like a house settled. He reached land and listened but he did not hear anything. He turned and looked back at Griff, who was moving faster than he himself had moved crossing the bridge.

The wind grew stronger now and though the river was moving as it had it seemed to Barstow that the wind on this side of the river was stronger and made more wind, swayed the trees on this side of the gorge more, bent more branches, fluttered more leaves along the bank of the river. He looked through the trees along the path that led away from the bridge. The path bare; dirt; scattered branches. Patches of flattened grass and weed. The road, the path, dry. An empty carton along one side, in the grass; a label flapping in the wind.

Barstow stood at the end of the bridge, staring at Griff. Griff seemed to be sprinting across the narrow gaps, walking through the air. Barstow put his hand on the rail and he saw Griff look at him, then back at the other side of the bridge from where he came. There was nothing he could do that would matter but Griff looked at him as if he could do something and he slowed down and started walking, still moving fast. Their eyes both serious. Griff's eyes widening. The humor that had been there gone.

Griff reached the end of the bridge and grabbed Barstow. Barstow pulled away, reaching for the Browning. Griff moved fast, grabbed Barstow's Browning, pulled Barstow down like a doll into a ditch behind some shrub. Pushed his head down into the dirt, his hand over his mouth. Barstow fighting but doing nothing. Griff let Barstow up, his hand still on the back of his neck, controlling him. He put a finger to his lips, motioned past the shrub and to the other side of the bridge.

Because of the water Barstow had not heard them, but Griff, on the other side, had heard the motorcade and then seen the front of the trucks coming out along the road when he was almost to the other side of the bridge. If they crossed the bridge they would see them and it would be over. If the motorcade continued on, went past the bridge and along the road to the next town, they would be okay. They looked back at the smoke. The smoke was still in the air.

There were not many vehicles in the motorcade. A couple of half-tracks and Hetzers, some trucks lugging Panzerabwehrwerfers, their wheels over the dusty road, a few escort vehicles rolling along the side, falling back and then pulling up. Barstow had seen the Panzerabwehrwerfers, which they called PAWs, plenty. But the PAWs were always moved in pieces. He had never seen a fully assembled PAW transported on its own wheels.

"They ain't going far," he said. "Dragging the PAW."

"Yep."

"They won't cross the bridge."

"Nope."

Griff pointed to a covered truck at the back of the motorcade. "They got prisoners," he said.

"Where?"

"The end."

Barstow saw the truck now, the white skin of the prisoners, the uniforms. Ten, fifteen at most. Sitting in the back of the truck, packed in like cargo, their faces sallow, shirts too big, sagging. At the bridge the first vehicle stopped and two men stepped out of a truck. They lit cigarettes and waved at the vehicles behind

them to stop. They walked to the bridge and stared out, looking in their direction. One of the men leaned on the railing, picked something from the bottom of his boot with a knife. He put the knife back into his pocket. They were staring at the smoke.

"They come over that bridge," said Griff.

"I know."

"Do the best we can."

"Yep."

"Didn't want to come on this damn little trip. But here we are."

"Yep. Here we are."

"Couldn't just let me be," said Griff. "Had to pull me down with you."

Barstow looked at Griff, back at the men at the other end of the bridge.

One of the men threw his cigarette into the gorge. He waved the truck with the prisoners forward. The truck drove to the front of the motorcade, stopped a few feet from the bridge. The passenger in the truck jumped down next to the man who had called them over. They talked for a few seconds, and the man walked to the back of the truck. He opened the gate at the back and the prisoners jumped down. The prisoners looked clumsy. They looked like jumping down from the truck could maybe break their bones.

"What you think, Cap?"

"Don't know."

The man who used the knife on his boots turned the prisoners around and around. Most of the prisoners got back in the truck. He closed the gate behind them. He led four prisoners to the bridge. The prisoners faced the gorge. Some of the prisoners in the truck looked at the four by the bridge and then turned back around.

Griff looked at Barstow but did not say anything.

"Son of a bitch," said Barstow.

They saw smoke from the pistol and then heard it and then they saw smoke again and then heard it again. The two bodies fell into the gorge. The man with the pistol was saying something

and the he pointed to the gorge and one and then the other prisoner jumped over the edge. Griff turned around and stared at his boots. Barstow leaned on his side. He looked away and then looked back at the motorcade. One of the men in one of the half-tracks was pointing at the smoke coming from over the trees. The two men by the bridge looked up at the smoke and then got back into their vehicle. The motorcade rolled by the bridge and disappeared beyond the trees down the road. One of the prisoners in the back of the truck looked towards the bridge when the truck passed. He seemed to look right at them, but behind the shrubs it would have been impossible to see them.

“We can go now,” Griff said. He handed Barstow the Browning.

“Let's go then,” he said. “Probably best.”

