

I live in a different Barkdale than the one you're used to seeing. The industrial district on the other end of town is less about suburban families, summer vacation, and barbecues, and more about long hours in the warehouse, lonely nights in the bar, and trying to find meaning in lives that never worked out the way they were supposed to. I reckon that you know the type; hard-luck folks who always manage to wind up in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Locals call it the Breaks. I guess I can understand why.

Don't get me wrong. It's not necessarily a bad place to be, just a little dustier, a little less idyllic than any of us might hope. Lord knows I've seen worse, but those are places I try not to think about anymore. In the meantime, for better or worse, the Breaks suit me just fine.

I'm Tank Adams. I moved into town a couple of years ago. It was supposed to be a temporary stop, just a brief respite to get my feet under me after my featured part in the military theater went sideways and *estar roto* put me on my ass. I believe my higher-ups referred to Barkdale as a "quiet place" for me to "escape the demons", or something equally melodramatic and silly.





Even on moving day, though, I knew that the Breaks wasn't a place that people left. New folks show up on occasion, but it doesn't take long for the spark to leave their eyes and the strength to leave their back. They become another piece of scenery and start blending into the background; kind of dull and gray, a lot like the rest of us.

But it's not necessarily the worst place to be.

The Army set me up with a small condo in town. A bedroom, kitchen, faulty wiring in the ceiling fan, and doorframes just low enough to bang the shit out of my head when I'm stumbling around in the middle of the night. My own little four rooms of paradise; hard to ask for more.

In addition to living space, cramped though it may be, government assistance got me on my feet with a warehouse job just down the road, and a shrink to talk about the wounds that weren't so easily healed. I don't like to talk about it, but I guess it helps a little bit. Lord knows I've got nothing but time in front of me, and nothing left to fill it up with.

"See ya tomorrow, Hank." My name, one I've always thought of as pretty simple, has been butchered in enough ways that my coworker's off-handed comment didn't even rankle.

"Naw. I got the day off." The badger wasn't even listening anymore, so it was more a reminder for my own benefit as I adjusted the side mirror of the company pick-up I'd been given and gave myself a watery smile in the glass.

"You look like shit, Adams."

It was a short drive home, but it was an even shorter drive to the bar that marked the halfway point between the two places I'd spend the rest of my life. Nobody looked surprised to see me when I slid in through the old west style swinging doors, though I reckon it was only a few of them that even looked up from their business at all.





That suited me just fine.

There was an uneven stool at the end of the bartop that I'd recently claimed as mine, mostly as experiment to see how many times I could sit my big ass on top of it before the stunted leg snapped clean in half. So far, so good.

The bartender, a sleepy-eyed bear of some kind, thumped a beer down in front of me without the need for pleasantries. It was smooth, and cold, and it went down as easily as the second one did. My shrink had spoken to me, at length, about "using alcohol as an emotional band-aid", and I could see the point that he was trying to make.

I stopped after three, which I considered a fair compromise.

"It's just knowin' that the world will not be cursin', or forgivin'..." I started to hum, because I didn't know the rest of the words. It felt nice, though, for the night air to ruffle through my short fur, and I savored the reprieve that came from a stiff couple of drinks in the melancholy silence of the fifth best bar in the Breaks.

My truck stayed in the parking lot. Even at my lowest, I didn't have it in me to risk hurting innocent drivers just trying to get home. The walk would do me good, more advice that came directly from my doctor. Nobody ever felt better by being a shut-in.





Not for the last time, I thanked good fortune for the small miracle of having a corner unit on the nearest building of the apartment complex. By the time I found myself fumbling my keys onto the concrete, though, I had a chill in my bones. The comfortable coolness had worn off with my alcohol buzz, and I found myself clenching my jaw in frustration as I struggled in the dark to fit the key into the lock.

“Not a god damn light on this building still workin’.” I mumbled to myself, finally getting myself situated, and into my own apartment. I was exhausted, and though I knew it would be anything but restful, sleep was finally foremost on my mind.

On my way to the bedroom, expertly avoiding bashing my shin into the coffee table, I stripped down to my skivvies, so all I had to do was fall into bed and mercifully lose consciousness before the loneliness managed to catch back up to me.





“Ever smilin’, ever gentle on my mind...”

Little did I know, my life was about to change forever.

