

Long, Long Way to Go

It was quite far, as it turned out, about a hundred and fifty miles. Yes, one hundred fifty, across a mountain range. My reaction as well, assuming you are now shaking your head in disbelief and muttering to yourself about how that's ridiculous, how could we do that.

Brin just shrugged.

"We have to go somewhere."

I have to admit, I briefly considered heading back up the valley to Dave's compound. All my reasons were wrong, I knew that even as it occurred to me, but it was a known quantity, which leads me to the next thing.

This is hard to write down, because right now, it is an *unknown* quantity. I can tell it was birthed in recent events, but it's hiding behind me, and I can only get glimpses of it. But the bits I can see do tell me something.

I am not who I was.

I remember how I briefly felt in the tree stand, willing to keep killing to take back what belonged to us. To me. Brin's voice had snapped me out of it, back into the person I used to be.

That wouldn't happen now. I can tell. I know I told you earlier that I'd become a harder person, but this is different and it scares me. There are things that used to limit me, but don't anymore.

Hey, maybe that's foreshadowing? Kinda sounds like it, except you and I are walking this together. Well, theoretically. We'll see if I'm right, I suppose, if I make it to the part that bears it out.

But I digress.

We agreed that we'd stay another day, in order to prepare for the journey. There was a new openness between us now, but limited. The glacier couldn't become a happily burbling stream in such a short period of time. She reverted to distance, but not nearly all the way.

I looted the bodies finally, and found several long knives, as well as an extendable baton. It occurred to me to ask Brin what Dave had taught her about self-defense. Her response was noncommittal at first, but she expanded without any prompting from me.

"I know how to fight, insofar as I can. You know my dad."

She hesitated, as though thinking how to best explain it. She then went on, but it was as if she'd switched subjects.

"My family used to watch a lot of movies, you know. I mean, a *lot*. It was one of the few things all of us liked to do together. Even when shit was falling apart at the end, we could still do that. Everybody got to pick. It was equal opportunity, right up to D-day.

After I...well, after, my father would always give me a running commentary, as if I'd get nothing out of it if he didn't tell me what he was seeing. It was annoying at first, but became something I relied on. Visual subtitles, I guess. Dialogue and a sound-track can only illuminate so much, right?

To your question, it's like the bit in *Star Wars* where Obi-wan puts the helmet on Luke, and has him face off against the remote. Except it isn't the Force, obviously, it's what I have left. Sound, vibration, smells. Whatever.

Are you going to get *Book of Eli* out of me? No. But I'm not totally helpless, either."

I laid the knives and baton out in front of her, and said,

"Anything here you want?"

She traced the forms of each with her fingers. She reached the baton, and frowned.

"What is this?"

I put it in her hand, and then put my hand over hers.

"Relax for a second."

I flipped the baton to the side, extending it. I let go. She felt along the extension with her other hand to the tiny ball at the end. Understanding bloomed on her face.

"Oh. Yeah, this is good."

She collapsed it without me having to tell her how, and then she flipped it once again. She collapsed it again.

I threw the other knives in the river later, as we already had a few in better shape among our supplies. I thought briefly then that this story might have gone another way if those men had made another choice, but I knew differently.

I ran some more river water through a filter, filling up what few empty containers we had with us, and readied the sled. I wanted to leave as early as possible, to maximize the cool of the morning. As evening approached, it was just firewood, our sleeping bags, and the two of us in the cave. Well, weapons too, to be accurate. Can you just assume that forward from here? It isn't a world for the unarmed anymore.

As the last light of sunset faded, and ambient illumination in the cave dwindled to that of the fire only, we both lay atop our sleeping bags. We hadn't spoken much through the afternoon, and less into evening. I was starting to drift off, when Brin spoke up.

"Jake."

"Yes?"

"Can we go back?"

That brought me back to my earlier thoughts about the same thing. I gave it another second or two, but came up with an identical answer.

"I don't think so. Even if we could get it back, what would be left? And how do we keep it? The math hasn't changed."

She sighed.

"You disappoint."

"Yeah. Been told that before."

She looked in my direction.

"I'm sorry. I'm not very good at jokes."

I shrugged, attempting to slough off the sting of it, but not quite able to.

"I'm not very good at fulfilling expectation. Your dad would attest. So would mine."

She was quiet for a long time. My irritation melted slowly away, and I began to drift off once again. Until,

"Jake."

"What?"

"I'm sorry."

"Brin, it's fine. I'm pretty tired, though."

She didn't back off.

"Say it."

"Say what?"

"I forgive you. Say it."

Her insistence dragged me away from sleep once more. I ran my palm across my forehead in frustration, but kept my voice even.

"I forgive you."

She smiled. I was semi-awake now, and focused on her face. Her expression wasn't grateful, it was triumphant.

It was my turn to sigh.

"Well played. What do you *really* want to talk about?"

She didn't hesitate.

"So, I told you about my grandfather."

She had. Maybe I should have gotten to this earlier, but I didn't so, oh well. Here it is. What I currently had of it, anyway.

The guy who might be able to help us, and may or may not still be alive, *and* was all those many miles away from where we were right now was Dave's father. And, to further stretch my use of the word "and" beyond legal limits, he and Dave had been estranged for so long, Brin had never met him.

"Yes, you did. Well, some, but you get a pass because I fell asleep while you were telling me. Kind of like how I'm probably going to now."

"It's my full disclosure."

I rallied myself as best I could.

"Ok. Paying attention."

"He lives about sixty miles from where my family used to live. Where my mom and brother are. Were. I don't know. My mother did speak to him occasionally, even though my dad wouldn't. He knows about me.

I wanted to put all my hopes out there. To be honest with you."

I had to process what that meant for more time than I would have expected it to take. It was as if her hopes had splashed down into the dark sea around me, and I had to see if they had any buoyancy.

They seemed to, yet a part of me sensed that they floated low in the water, in danger of a coming storm.

"I understand. Let's try."

She smiled. Had she given me that in the same way at any time before, I would've become even more of a slave than I was now. It still warmed me, but I wasn't captured. Things were shifting. I thought I knew what I needed next.

"But I'll need the whole story, first."