

Part Two

Over the Mountain

SR 78 west-bound ascended through a slash in the forest out of Pine Notch just below us, winding its way up the mountain-side to our left. The switch-backed route was clearly visible from where we stood, and the pass was a deep cut between peaks, just below the snow-line. I described it to Brin, ending with,

"It looks like a long haul up. Maybe we'd be better off hooking back up with the interstate."

"That's a mile and a half of tunnel, though, at almost the same elevation."

"It is? How do you know that?"

She snorted.

"One guess. It was just us for quite a while. The data dumps were real. He...."

She stopped, and tears started to fall before she wiped them angrily away.

"Dammit."

"Yeah."

I said it in the absence of any other response, but her words were an invocation, calling Dave from my unconscious. The better part of a year flooded in, and the hunt ruled. It was a slap in the face. Funneling game through a narrow geographical aperture made for a target-rich environment. I knew this.

"Well, shit."

"What?"

"Choke points."

She got it as fast as his kid would.

"Oh. That's not good."

I pressed a hand against my forehead, and puffed out a breath.

"No. Not good."

"They can see us coming."

"Yes."

"Any ideas? Would the tunnel be better? I could...."

Then she got to the end of it in her mind, and shook her head.

"No, probably not. They'd be at either end. Any ideas?"

"None good."

"Jake, you have one job."

"Wanna be bait?"

That stopped her for almost a full second.

"Are you serious?"

"It's what I got."

Brin pulled the wheel-barrow upward along the road, trying to keep the left wheel inside the edge of the rumble-strip at the asphalt's margin. The day was warm, even at this altitude, and sweat soaked her clothes. It took all of her concentration to interpret the slope of the roadway, the vibration of the wheel within the successive indentations along the road-side, and sounds bouncing inward to her from without. Jake would occasionally voice an additional input, but it was always from afar and away, nearly unheard. Nearly, but *not* unheard. He made sure of it.

It felt like she'd been pulling forever.

The idea that she'd listened to Jake's stupid plan, and then willingly participated seemed to grow more preposterous with each passing minute. Yet, each time he gave out his distant course corrections, she continued to make the adjustments.

Why?

Her dad was gone, but not before this guy had been vetted and installed, like some parental control app. It still infuriated her, when she thought too long about it. Well, kind of.

She knew the reasons. In some ways, she had probably come to know her father's mind better than her mother ever had. It was some confluence of genetics, temperament, and familiarity that built that bridge, but her injury had cut the ribbon on the opening. After that, it was just traffic.

Traffic.

A word that would always precede her last visual memory before the lights went out.

A busy intersection, but the lights are in safe mode after a power failure. They are all blinking red, instead of the organized shifts from the other colors. Her head is turned toward her father, who is driving, as they discuss something that will never come back to her. He faces forward, his mouth moving as he comes to a complete stop, and then proceeds. He starts to turn toward her as a shadow climbs up the window behind her, filling the car. His eyes widen.

Life after lights out had been a steady retreat into her own version of her father's fortress of solitude. She had to bear witness to the dissolution of her family without being able to see it. Lines were drawn in darkness, and became fractures which widened as two worlds pulled apart. Even the sound of it was too much, and she retreated before it.

Eventually, there were only the crystalline walls around her, bathing her in light she couldn't see. Oh, yeah, and a com-link to a man whose own retreat was so complete that when something pulled the rug out from underneath the rest of the world, he just doubled down on isolation.

Memory lane was a useless path, so she banished it. She'd now had years to tame it. It certainly wouldn't help her here.

Her thoughts returned to Jake as it submerged. He had managed to subvert every barrier she'd erected between them with all the artifice of a three-year old, and yet the blue-flame of her initial resentment had steadily dwindled to become what it was now. Just a warm glow. The very idea baffled her.

And now, here she was. She was presenting herself like a gift to the waiting wolves above, with only her tenuous faith in a person who she had no visual conception of to rely on.

She briefly wondered if she'd been blind from birth whether it was a distinction she'd make. She didn't think so.

That just made her longing for the missing sense that much stronger, and her anger and frustration as well. Coming to terms with being blind was not a single choice, but a seemingly infinite series of choices. It made her want to scream.

The temperature had dropped a bit, the wind had picked up, and she'd not heard from Jake in a while. She'd been able to keep track of the edge of road pretty well, and hadn't needed any input, but alone could go from lower-case nervous to all caps shouting pretty quick, given a change in circumstance. Where was he?

The she heard it. A scuffing sound above the rumble of the tire. She stopped, and realized she could smell him, too. She knew what an unwashed man smelled like.

Fucking introspection.

She put her hand in her pocket, grasping the baton.

"No need for that. Hands out."

The footsteps approached.

"I said, hands out."

"No." She tensed, waiting for the moment of collision, wondering if she'd act in time.

The footsteps halted, quite near. The smell of him was just north of gag reflex, and he was a nose-breather, evidently. Sound painted a shape before her, and she was on the cusp of her uncoil, when he called out to someone else.

"Ben, get out here. You have to see this."

"Let me through." Her voice sounded even to her, despite her fear.

"Uh, no. Everybody pays first."

More footsteps across the asphalt, and another voice. And another smell, this one actually worse.

"Is she...blind? Damn." The new voice was higher, and younger. Now two forms loomed in the sense-scape before her. The first one spoke.

"You got some balls, girl. How'd you make it this far?"

Where are you, Jake?

"Let me through."

"Oh, for...."

She felt the first one reach for her, the movement foretold in a mix of smell, air movement, and tiny sounds. She stepped back, drawing the baton and extending it in one motion, and then brought it back in with a violent reverse of trajectory. She felt it connect, and the resulting howl of pain made her smile, even as the other slammed into her with a full body tackle that ground her into the pavement. Air departed her lungs without permission, and the baton skittered away, loosed from her fingers by the impact.

She could feel him on top of her as she struggled to suck in enough air to stay conscious. His foul breath blew into her face, and the sound of the exhalation painted a dim map in front of her.

Where are you, Jake?

She fought, but his weight prevented her from pulling in much air. She had to do something.

She whipped her head forward, even as consciousness started to depart.

She felt something semi-rigid collapse against her forehead, and felt warmth on her face even as a darkness deeper than blindness overtook her.

I watched her come awake, and start to struggle. I spoke against her re-initialized fear even as I cradled her head in my lap.

"It's ok, Brin. We did it."

She struggled for a moment longer, as she recognized my voice, and took in my meaning. She went limp, and didn't speak for a few seconds as her breathing slowed.

"Where were you?"

Her tone was accusatory, as I knew it would be. Rightly so.

"There were two more. I'm sorry."

We were both silent for a bit. I broke it.

"I thought you said I wasn't getting *The Book of Eli* out of you. Liar. That was awesome."

She reached up with her hands, grasping both sides of my face, and traced the outlines of it with her fingers. Her eyes were dry, but I could feel a sense of urgency in her touch.

I grasped her wrists gently, not in attempt to dissuade her, but to confirm.

She spoke against it, though.

"You weren't there."

"I was. I guess it's up to you whether you believe me."

She withdrew her hands and sat up, swiveling toward me. Dried blood radiated out and downward across her forehead and cheeks from a central red welt near her hairline. Her pale blue eyes glittered against the dark red backdrop. She didn't say anything for a few seconds, and I wondered if I'd broken whatever I'd built.

Then she took a breath, and closed her eyes. When she opened them again, she spoke.

"Ok. You're here now. How bad-ass was I?"

"Oh, man. The fat tub you put down first never got up again. I'm going to guess that knee was bad to begin with. The other one...how to say it. You absolutely *hammered* his nose. I swear, you look like Braveheart right now. He was still rain-birding everywhere when I put one in his dome."

"And there were more?"

"Yeah, a couple. They came running once the screaming started."

"Wow. I did it. We did it."

"Yep. Again."

We sat in silence, and for a very brief time, there was no distance at all between us. She came back first.

"Time to go?"

"Yeah, but first we pillage their stuff. There's a lot."

And there was, certainly too much for us to take. Whoever came along after we left was going to have the best version of a good day since the world stopped handing them out. The world, or whatever.

The road on the other side of the pass was less arduous, with wider curves and a slightly gentler grade, as if our success had smoothed our way forward a bit.

For a brief, golden time, it held. We'd crossed the divide, and were that much nearer our goal.

Then, of course, other people fucked it up again.