

Shooting Stars

Bear had obviously added fuel to the fire already, so I made my way through the trees again towards the road. The wind had picked up considerably while I'd been asleep, and as I cleared the edge of the grove, it was apparent that bad weather had moved in. The moon had passed beyond the mountains, and the stars were hidden behind a cloud-layer that spanned the entire sky. There was little ambient light, and I could barely see the road as I located the same rock as before. I sat down to keep watch. It seemed a nearly pointless exercise, given what I could actually see.

I'd been sitting for quite a while, my train of thought passing through station after station without stopping to take on or drop off. It was a constant montage of present and past, and none of it was comforting. Wind whipped through the grass and trees, and a few tentative drops of rain rode the currents. Even in the dark, the frantic movement in front of me was apparent.

Then the sky above the cloud layer pulsed once. It lit the clouds with a bright orange glow which quickly faded, but didn't disappear entirely. At the same time there was a compression in the air that felt like a detonation that I couldn't hear. Three orange specks punctured the cloud layer above, falling on separate trajectories towards the ground. I stood up reflexively, and watched the orange sparks arc downward.

One was on track to impact quite close, off to my left. I could see that one clearly. While none of them were exactly floating towards the ground, it was also apparent that weren't traveling at anywhere near terminal velocity.

Another was falling towards one of the steel towers carrying high-tension transmission lines along the other side of the highway. The third was a dim speck way off to my right, destined for touch-down in a forested section of land beyond the clear-cut swath the power lines ran through.

The first one to come to rest actually hit the top of a steel tower on the side nearest the highway, and sparks showered down as the orange light from within the little ember temporarily increased for a few seconds. It seemed to stick there, its fall arrested. Then, the power lines adjacent to it flared with what looked like tiny bits of lightning. These raced away to either side faster than I could track along the wires, disappearing into the night as the orange glow in the atmosphere above dimmed even more.

Even as I was watching all this occur, I made sure to track the closest one. It hit the ground about a hundred yards away, just after the activity on the tower ended. I was moving towards it even as the last bit of orange illumination above the clouds departed, as did the glow from the falling bit of whatever it was. In the end, I had to get down on my hands and knees and crawl the last few yards. I dug through the long grass, searching through the soil at its base. I was rewarded as my hand swept across a small, angular bit of some still-warm, hard material. I back-tracked, and retrieved it.

I held it up, and then realized there was still some ambient source of illumination present. I looked up, and could see a dim yellow glow on the horizon back down the highway we'd already travelled. Then it too faded to nothing, but not before I could see that I held a glass cube about two inches on a side in my hand. I could tell it was transparent, as I could see the pale flesh of my hand through it.

I got to my feet and the wind now carried a little more rain on its back, potentially a promise of things to come. I looked back towards Evanston. I thought about the diminutive lightning disappearing along the transmission lines in each direction.

Were those city lights glowing in Evanston, for a moment? That's what it had looked like.

Wow. Wouldn't *that* be a punch in the nuts for anybody back there who might be awake to witness it; to see those long-dormant bulbs come back to life for a few seconds, only to go out again. My mind swirled with the ramifications, though I couldn't fully wrap my head around what had just happened. I decided it was time to get a couple other opinions about this weirdness.

I headed back towards the grove of trees, but stopped in front of the rock that had been my perch multiple times tonight. I faced back towards the road, and mentally marked the tower where the other cube had landed. Then I stared out at the forest beyond the power lines, trying to remember the outline of the tree-tops where the third cube had fallen. I wished I'd paid more attention when the sky had been lit up. Now, it was like trying to find black shapes against a dark charcoal background. I thought I could see a section of the tree-top outline that corresponded to what my mind told me it remembered, but I knew there was no certainty it was correct. Still, I studied it for a few seconds, trying to commit it to memory.

Then I turned and headed back to the grove and the fire, the cube in my hand.

Both Brin and Bear were still asleep, so I sat down next to the fire and took the opportunity to examine the glass cube a little more closely. I held it palm up, and brought it closer to the fire for more light on the subject.

Then I had to snatch my hand away, as the heat from the flames increased enough to singe my fingertips even as I grasped the cube to keep hold of it. The fire hadn't changed, or flared, but the heat coming off of it had. I extended my other hand, palm out. It was now the same tepid warmth as before.

I repeated the experiment, this time with a little more care, and got the same result. As the cube neared the flames, the heat generated by the fire shot up remarkably. Withdrawing it also gave the same result. The cube itself didn't seem to change during its proximity or withdrawal, at least as far as I could tell.

Bear's raspy voice startled me.

"What is that?"

I looked up at him. He was blinking the last bit of sleep away, and was focusing on my open hand and the cube.

"I have no idea. You really need to check this out, though."

He extricated himself from his sleeping bag, and then crouched next to me. I handed him the cube.

"Hold it close to the fire, but be careful. Not too close."

He frowned at me, but then did so. He made the same mistake, and I saw him jerk his hand back, nearly losing his grip on the cube. I watched him do the same duplication I had, and then he looked back up at me. His black eyes were wide, and his whisper was intense.

"Where the hell did you get this?"

So I told him about the pulse of light, and the descent of the little orange embers. I told him the rest of the story, and didn't leave anything out. His expression became a bit more dubious as I related it, but he didn't outright scoff at me, either. I wondered at my own openness, given how little time and

interaction I'd had with the big man. But, he hadn't murdered me in my sleep, so...that had to count for something.

I finished, and I saw him take a minute to really think about it before responding. I just waited, figuring it was a lot to swallow. I didn't know what to make of it, and I'd *been* there. He looked down at the cube, turning it over and over in his hand. He finally caught my eyes again.

"You said there were sparks on the tower when that other one hit it? And then, what, a...discharge along the power line?"

"Sparks, yeah. The other, I don't know. It's like I said. Like a cluster of little bits of lightning, and then, boom. Gone in each direction, faster than I could see. Some kind of energy. I mean, you don't normally see electricity, right?"

He nodded, obviously still in his head with it. He was looking back down at the cube again when he asked,

"And you think it was city lights you saw at the end?"

"It's been a while since any of us have seen any kind of light pollution, obviously, but that's what it looked like to me."

He nodded again, without looking up.

Then he moved quickly, rising up and turning. He reached for his pack, and my wild first thought was that he was grabbing it up in order to make a run for it. The unexpectedness of it froze me temporarily in place.

But he just pulled it toward him, and then sat back down next to me. He must've seen the expression on my face. He smiled his wolf smile.

"Easy, Romeo. It's just another experiment."

"Stop calling me that."

"Make me."

He opened an outer flap, and hooked out a key-ring attached to a loop sewn inside the pocket. There were no keys on it, but there was a small cylinder tied to it by a quick-release mechanism. He popped the cylinder free and held it up, aligning it alongside the cube. I recognized it as a laser pointer just as he pressed a tiny button at the base of it.

We both saw the tiny red dot appear on the trunk of a nearby tree. He clicked it off, and then on again. The red dot winked obediently out and then reappeared again. It started to jog a little bit as Bear's hand began to tremble, but then he turned it off again. We were both silent, staring at the spot where it had been. He spoke, the rasp in his low voice rougher than I'd heard so far.

"Ho-ly shit."

I was mute. The meaning of it was crashing down on me in successive waves, each carrying more fragments of realization than I could assemble. I opened my mouth to try to speak anyway, but nothing came out.

Bear held the cube out to me. I took it back, and then we both just stared at it in my open palm. We stared for a long time. It seemed like neither of us could get past the events to the meaning they so obviously carried. Or, maybe we just didn't want to, yet.

The proverbial "they" say that things often come in threes. I'd never experienced it myself in any meaningful way that I can remember, but like so many other intangibles it's part of our collective lore. We'd assigned names to it, even. Trifecta. Hat trick. It's the same idea, drawn from different sources.

We got one of those.

From across the fire, we heard,
"Wha...what is that?"

Brin was sitting up, half-out of her sleeping bag. She was looking *directly* at the cube. Even as I tried to form a response, she slipped out the rest of the way and came toward us moving quickly. She held a low hand out towards the fire, using the heat from it to help her skirt around it. I finally found the power of speech again as she stopped in front of me, and knelt down on one knee.

"Brin, what are you doing?"

She didn't answer. Her expression was one part concentration and one of wonder. She reached out and I thought she'd take the little glass piece out of my hand but she didn't, at least not right away. Instead, she grasped my hand to either side of it with both of hers. She squeezed at first, and then ran her fingers across the inside of my wrist and along my up-turned fingers. She then pressed against my finger-tips with her own, as if testing their resistance.

Only then did she pick up the cube with her right hand, and began to run it up my arm. It was slow at first but she picked up speed quickly. She held it about an inch above my skin. It almost felt like she was scanning me with it.

I could sense Bear watching, but I was too confused to do anything but watch as well. I did manage to speak her name again, but she reached up and unerringly put the fingertips of her other hand against my lips to silence me.

She ran the cube across my shoulder, and then up the side of my neck. She stopped finally near my right eye. She increased the distance a little bit, and then slowly traced it across my face a few times.

I'd been more focused on her movements, but now I looked directly into her downturned face. Tears marked trails through the accumulated dirt on her cheeks. Emotional alarm bells began to ring. As she removed her fingers from my lips, I asked the only question that came to me.

"Brin, what is it?"

She answered, as more tears fell.

"I can see you."

