

Everything You Want

Sleep was obviously off the table for all of us. We spent the small balance of the remaining pre-dawn hours around the fire. Brin flitted around Bear and I at first as I repeated the story for her, but she was more consumed with using the cube to look at everything she could. She would verge away temporarily looking at other things, but always returned to us. She must have scanned each of us half a dozen times. Bear had a stoic look on his face while being inspected. I didn't mind at all because when she got to my face each time, she'd kiss me. Most of the time it was on the cheek, but once it was on the lips. After that one she said,

"You're not *bad*-looking. I was worried about a beauty and the beast situation."

Bear coughed in response to that. I glared at him.

Initially, we just watched her. There was an almost frantic starvation in her movements as she sought to take in as much information as possible, having gained access to a long-lost wavelength. But eventually, Bear engaged me. His black eyes glittered in the fire-light.

"Thoughts there, Romeo?"

Brin laughed. I didn't.

"Would you *just* stop."

He shrugged, and I could see him shift out of tease mode to what he really was thinking about. His next rough whispers were more serious.

"I know what I think. I'm curious to know what you do. You too, Brin."

She settled finally, sitting next to me. She addressed his statement.

"Who goes first?"

Bear seemed serious in his reply, which threw me.

"Leader of the pack. Always."

I was tempted to defer, or deflect. It made no sense to me that he'd not assert himself, given his age and stature. I didn't sense any duplicity in his statement, but he was still the outsider. Maybe he was just biding his time. Brin didn't snigger or react either, oddly. She reached out and put her hand on my leg. I decided to leave hierarchy for another time, and just say what nascent ideas were banging around in my mind. I pointed at the cube in Brin's other hand.

"That's a battery. And an amplifier. *And*, whatever it is that talks to Brin's eyes. It's also a conduit back to before, right? At least a little bit."

There are two more out there that I know of. We don't know if the other ones are the same as this one, but we should find out. At least, that's what I think. Beyond that, I'm still not sure."

Bear nodded, but I could tell from his expression that I'd not met whatever minimum standard of analysis he held. I sighed.

"Your turn, Mr. Engineer."

His tone in response was largely absent of condescension, but not entirely.

"That's a good start. Beyond what it is, let's get bigger picture. You saw three."

"Yes."

"You. Sitting there in this place. Kind of middle of nowhere. Three of them."

He could see the penny drop when I got it. I didn't attempt to respond, just nodded. He continued.

"These could be everywhere. Look how fast you figured it out. Other people will too."

Then Brin spoke up, holding the cube aloft in her palm.

"What happens when you put these things together? Do they talk to each other? Can I see further away if I have more of them?"

That hit me hard, and I could see Bear react as well. The possibilities became a huge extension of the tiny leaps we'd already made. Suddenly, the landing points of the other orange specks took on a more urgent significance.

Something occurred to me.

"Brin, what does it look like to you?"

She turned toward me, automatically bringing the cube up to my face as she responded.

"It glows white. Like a flash-light. It's how I can see."

My words were directed at her, but I diverted my eyes toward Bear at the last second.

"So if you can see this one, maybe you can see the other ones?"

"Maybe. If they're all the same, why not?"

"And it's on all the time?"

She nodded.

"So far. I mean, since I woke up anyway. What does it look like to you?"

Bear fielded that answer.

"A little clear block. No glow."

None of us said anything more for at least a minute. We were all processing the data.

The wind began to die down, and the storm had never delivered on its promise of rain. There had been a few squalls, but nothing able to drench the canopy above enough for us to feel it. During our conversation, the surrounding dark had begun to lighten. Brin engaged first.

"You think I can help us find more of these, *because of the glow.*"

I thought to look at Bear again before answering, but didn't. Whatever his ultimate plans were, it was pretty clear he was still playing the consultant card right now.

"Hopefully. Can you see anything else from here?"

She thought about it for a second. Then she closed her fist around the cube, and put that arm behind her back. She rose from her sitting position onto her knees, and then looked around across maybe 280 degrees. She traversed it several times, but then did a quick pendulum, coming to rest on a vector pointing out in the direction of the road. She pointed with her other hand.

"There's something in that direction, I think. It's tiny, and dim. Maybe it's just in my head, though."

The trees obscured it, but I'd travelled in that direction enough times earlier to know that she was pointing at the road, and most likely the transmission tower now hosting the first fallen ember. I told her as much.

"No, I'm pretty sure that's one of them. We should pack up and get moving."

We broke camp and extinguished the fire, more out of habit than to address any danger of it spreading. As we left the grove, I detoured to my rock-perch and made sure again which tower we were headed for.

The wind had almost completely stopped, and the eastern horizon was pale pink above the serrated tips of the mountains when we arrived at the base of the tower. The metal structure stretched up into the sky, each of the four vertical legs anchored atop a round concrete piling. I stared upward.

“*Shit* this thing is tall.”

Bear agreed.

“Yep. About 150 feet.”

“Of course you would know that. How do I get up there?”

He pointed up along the metal leg closest to us.

“You see those pins sticking out? That’s your ladder.”

Daylight was increasing by the minute, and I could see what he was referring to. The steel legs of the tower were triangular, and the two outward faces of this one had metal pins bolted to them at alternating intervals. They stuck out about eight inches, and had what looked like a hex-bolt head at the tip. They climbed up the entirety of the support to the super-structure up at the top.

I must have hesitated a moment too long, because Bear looked at me then, drawn back from his inspection of the tower. The tone of his whispered words carried a question deeper than the content.

“You want me to do it?”

My response was instant, but I knew it was partially a reflex. There was certainly a part of me that wanted to abdicate.

“No. Boost me up.”

Brin stepped in then, holding the cube up in the now *de facto* “I want to see your face when we’re talking” move. She looked apprehensive.

“Why don’t we just go find the third one? We’d get all the answers without the risk, right?”

Again, I was tempted to avoid the climb. But there was something in this between Bear and I now, at least that’s what it seemed like. He might be making all the right noises so far, but this had started to feel more and more like a test. So I made up a justification for doing it.

“If he’s wrong, and these *are* the only three, then we’re going to want all of them.”

She didn’t seem convinced. In fact, she was starting to look a bit alarmed.

“No, Jake. Please don’t. Let *him* go if he wants to.”

Her plea was pretty tough to shoulder aside but I did it anyway, taking the opportunity to clothe it in a specious insult.

“Are you kidding? He’s too old and fat to make it up there.”

Bear didn’t say anything, but he gave me a much darker version of his predatory smile. I put all the reassurance I didn’t really feel into what might turn out to be my last words.

“Don’t worry, Brin. I’ll be back in no time. I love you.”

I started to turn back toward Bear and the tower, but Brin stopped me.

“Wait. Take this.”

She offered the cube to me on an open palm. I could see the conflict in her face, the not wanting to part with this new treasure against...what? I asked her.

“Why?”

“It’s small. It might be hard to find up there. But, I can see them both. I can let you know when you’re close, hopefully.”

“Ok.” I took it. As I did, she closed her hand around mine and squeezed before letting go.

I put the block in my front pocket, and then turned around. Bear knelt, lacing his fingers together. I stepped into the cradle, and he lifted me up high enough to pull myself onto the top of the concrete base.

The wind had dried the metal surfaces before subsiding, so the pins were cold, but not slippery. I started to climb. Daybreak was imminent, so it was easy enough to see where to put my hands and feet.

No lie, Reader. It was terrifying, and only got more so the farther I got from the ground.

I'd killed people, and stacked their bodies like cord-wood. You'd think that I'd be inured to fear by now, but I wasn't. Not this kind, anyway. My enemy now was gravity, and it grew in power and menace the further up I climbed.

I couldn't tell you how long it took to reach the upper structure, but probably less time than it seemed. The wind, so quiet at ground level, had begun to gust a bit. Nothing major, but any movement up here held threat.

Upper and lower I-beams about six feet between on the horizontal formed a bounding box, tying the tower legs together at the top. The rest of the super-structure framework sat on that box. I could see metal struts extending outward above it supporting the actual power-lines, as well as vertical constructs hosting ceramic insulators and cylindrical transformers all wired together in arcane patterns.

The pins continued up this leg to the top of the bounding box, but then stopped. It was clear that once up here, the linemen who serviced these towers must have had other means of traversing the upper structure.

I took a deep breath, and then looked down. Both Brin and Bear were obviously shouting at me, but I couldn't hear them beyond an indistinct murmur. They looked so small. They were both gesturing as well, and that was much more informative. They were both pointing towards the other leg of the tower parallel to the road.

I'd already figured out that my one move here was to grab the upper I-beam, and use the lower as a foot-hold to shimmy towards the center. I could only hope that the cube we wanted was somewhere atop the upper. If not, I'd either climb down again empty-handed, or fall to my death trying to locate it.

I transitioned from the pins to the I-beams. My first step towards the middle was pretty close to my last. My right foot slipped off, and gravity seized the opportunity to pull at the other three contact points. I felt my hands slip before I could grip more tightly, but new adrenalin hit my system like an electrical surge and I was able to hold on until I could regain my footing.

After that, it was slide a few steps to the right, and then look down for guidance. Besides terror management, that is. At about the half-way mark, Brin and Bear were both pointing inward, rather than to the right. It would appear that I was in the right place.

I tightened my grip with my dominant hand and then reached up with the other, shifting upward on my toes so that I could feel across the top of the upper beam. I swept back and forth, questing for the little block.

Nothing.

I moved slightly more to the right. Same result.

I looked down again. No change. They were still pointing inward.

A little more to the right got me nothing as well.

I shifted back to the left several steps. I could feel my arms starting to really feel the strain. I didn't have much left.

I probed across the top of the metal beam again, wishing I could see what I was doing.

Just as my hand reached the outward swing of its leftward arc, I felt the tip of my index finger contact something, knocking it away. I watched as a tiny shape arced away behind and below the upper beam, glinting occasionally in the morning sun nearly cresting the mountains as it fell towards the ground.

I regained my hold on the metal with both hands, staring downwards as Brin surged forward towards the place it landed, with Bear right on her heels.

I didn't wait to check, I just slid right again until I could move back onto the relative safety of the pins. Once I was there, I did look down again. Brin was looking up at me, and waving for me to come down. I couldn't see her face well enough to see a smile, but her body language said enough. Even Bear echoed her downward waves.

I hesitated. I felt deeply exhausted. It was beyond anything I'd ever felt so far. It was not so much physical as existential, a cage match where my past and this new future beat the shit out of each other to determine which would bury me. I turned to watch the sun break above the mountains, inevitable in its circadian rhythm.

Gravity spoke to me then. It explained the mechanics of letting go. Seconds of free-fall, and then nothing. Freedom.

I looked down again. Brin and Bear were standing there unmoving, looking up at me. They were waiting.

I sighed, and then began to descend the tower.

