

Andrew

Brin awoke to a pounding headache, and the pre-cube charcoal mist that had been her visual life since her injury. The wave of instant despair threatened to drown her, until she saw a bright-white spark in her peripheral vision.

Then she almost laughed as she processed the thought of “peripheral vision”.

She put a hand to her hoodie pouch, knowing her saltine packet of cubes was gone, but helpless to not check. She was correct, of course.

She turned her head, put her hand out toward the spark, and almost immediately her palm and fingertips met a cold, textured surface. It felt like painted cinder-block. She ran her fingers downward, and found the dimple of the mortar joint between the blocks, confirming it. With her other hand, she traced the edge of a thin mattress, sitting on a metal surface. The air was close, and smelled faintly of urine and mildew.

She’d never been in jail, but her mind went there anyway. In her imagination, it was that, or some other horrible institution, like a mental hospital. It was a quick leap based on what she knew of the size of Garnet to figure it was most likely the former. Provided she was still *in* Garnet. Even as she thought this, she knew she was. She remembered the metal gates, and that said all it needed to as the word “enclave” popped into her head.

She sat up, and instantly regretted it. The pain in her head trebled, and she couldn’t help but moan out loud.

Then she heard a boy’s voice.

“Hey. Hey! You awake now?”

She wasn’t able to answer right away as she put both hands to her forehead. She took several deep breaths, and the pain lessened bit-by-bit.

The boy, though she didn’t know for sure if boy fit after all kept at it. He sounded young, but it was hard to tell.

“Hey! You! You awake?”

Brin decided to short-circuit the interchange until she was able to think straight, if she could even get there. She thought that might be debatable.

“Shhh! Give me a minute.”

There was silence for a second or two, but then,

“Ok. Sorry.”

She ran her hands through her hair and hated how greasy it felt, but just that inward-facing maintenance seemed to help a lot. She took another deep breath, and decided to get whatever information she could from whoever this was.

“Where am I?”

The response was almost instant, and effusive.

“You’re in jail. I’m usually here by myself most of the time. Once in a while, they’ll throw Ray or Charlie in here because they got drunk, but you’re the first girl *ever*. I know you ain’t from town, neither. You *gotta* tell me what you did.”

Brin took the burst of info in, and tried to decide what say next. She was calming quickly, but she was still unsure. She decided on baby steps.

"Who are you?"

She was not prepared for what came next. The first part was bright enough, but soon she could hear some ice behind it.

"I'm Andrew. My father runs this place. The town, I mean, not like just the jail, you know? He's a complete asshole. I tried to kill him like, four times, 'cause he let my mom die? Each time, I think, 'he's gonna put a bullet in me now', but he never does. Just sticks me in here. What's your name?"

She took a second. This was getting weird really fast. She opted for the truth, because...why not.

"Um...ok. That sounds horrible, but I guess I can understand that. I'm Brin. Grant Whitman is my grandfather, and I'd like to try to kill *him* right about now."

"Whoa! *Really?* He's like, my dad's lieutenant! Did you try to whack him already? Is that why you're in here?"

Brin wondered how far to take this. Her head still hurt, and she didn't feel up to trying to figure out if this person was being truthful, or was a plant to get information out of her. What was clear to her was that he had a cube. That was worth exploring. She answered him.

"No, Andrew. I just tried to talk to him, and...it didn't go well. I came here looking for my mom and brother. Him too, but he's not the man I thought he might be."

"Oh. That sucks. I coulda told you he was dick, too, if I'd been there. He threw you in here just for trying to talk?"

Brin didn't answer him right away. She stood up, and used the edge of the cot to trace her way towards what she could tell was an open space at the front of the room she was in. It was both a blessing and a deep loss as compensatory senses came back online, taking the place of sight once again. She tracked the white spark of the cube to her left as she probed before her with one hand, and it didn't move. It only took several steps beyond the end of the rudimentary bed before her outstretched hand found a vertical metal bar. Sweeping the same hand from side to side confirmed the succession of more of them, at about eight inch intervals. Her imagination told her what she'd see, if she could.

She really was in a jail cell. That part was true, anyway.

Brin put out her other hand, and grasped the adjacent bar. She stood there for a few moments, and the only thing she wanted was Jake. Tears threatened, and her fear pressed in, and it seemed that he was the only thing that could redeem this.

But he wasn't here. She knew at her core that he would come when he could, *if* he could. All she could do was hope he and Bear were still alive. Nevertheless, she was alone in this now, and needed to rise to it. And hadn't she already proven she could handle the tough shit life threw at her?

Brin mastered herself, and spoke to the boy-man in the next cell.

"Well, I guess it's a little more complicated than that. How long have you been in here?" Any information was a puzzle piece, she thought to herself.

She watched as the white spark moved from where it had been, accompanied by the sound of light foot-falls. It halted right next to her, and when Andrew spoke, his voice was less muffled and echoed out into what she assumed was a hallway in front of her.

"I dunno. Couple weeks, maybe, this time? Ain't sure. Junie said yesterday my dad was out of town. Nobody else'll cut me loose, so...."

Brin tried to figure out which thread to follow. The idea that this was either a very important relationship to pursue or a trap was becoming more real by the minute. She was still trying to make a decision when Andrew spoke up again.

"You want to see something cool?"

Her response was easy, because it was true.

"I'd love to, Andrew, but I can't see. I'm blind."

There was silence for a second, but then,

"Really?"

"Yes, really."

More silence. When Andrew spoke again, she could hear all the questions he wanted to ask but didn't. He was like most people when pressed against the hard edge of someone else's handicap.

"I'm...I'm...I'm sorry. Didn't mean to be a jerk."

Brin let the awkward quiet that followed play out as long as it needed to. It was just more evidence for her that he was most likely what he sounded like.

But she couldn't know for certain, so she finally answered him, because she was pretty sure about the subject matter. It was another puzzle piece, either way.

"You could describe it to me, if you want. I wasn't always blind, so I can picture stuff okay."

Then the spark was moving, and an open hand appeared in front of her, holding the glowing white cube. She could see portions of the metal bars in front of her in the low illumination a single cube provided.

In the moment, she remembered tracing Jake with the cube he'd gotten after it fell from the sky, and seeing his face for the first time. It made her want to cry again. It also made her want to snatch it out of Andrew's open palm. She forced herself to do neither of those things, and just wait. He spoke.

"Are you by the bars?"

"Yes."

"Reach through."

"Why?"

"You have to hold it, so you know I'm not lying."

Brin knew she should resist more to play out the charade, but she didn't have it to wait any longer. Reaching through the bars in front of her, she intentionally went high and too far out. Andrew compensated, and put the cube into her hand. She took it, and pulled back.

"What is it?"

She could hear the excitement in his voice, as well as something...conspiratorial. That was the word that occurred to her anyway. She didn't know if it was a real word or not.

"I found it down by the river. It looks like a little glass block, but it ain't glass, that's for sure. Before I figured out what it was, I took a hammer to it. It was a bad day, and I was pissed off, ok, just so you know. But it won't break, or scratch, or anythin'. I cain't even put a mark on it. And, it don't feel like glass, neither. Feel how it ain't cold, or hot, or anythin'? But that's not the best part."

As he got going, Brin could hear his drawl become more pronounced, and it vaguely reminded her of something. She couldn't access it, though, so she went on.

"What's the best part?"

Andrew lowered his voice, as if there might be someone nearby. For all she knew, maybe there was, but she didn't think so. It was more intuition than her sense of smell or hearing.

"After I got done beating the shit out of it, I went into my room, and set it on my desk."

He hesitated, as if sharing the next bit was too much, but then went on in an almost-whisper.

"The table lamp lit up."

Brin found it easier to slip into the artifice of it now. Her head was mostly clear, and the pain had dropped quite a bit more.

"Now I know you're lying."

He protested.

"No! I swear! It musta been on when the power went out, 'cause I could switch it off. But I could also switch it back on. It's like that thing's a...battery, or somethin'."

Once again, Brin found herself too impatient to play-act as long as she thought she should, even if it was easier to do now.

"If it *is* true, why tell me this? You don't know me, Andrew."

His response was like an unburdening. She could hear it in his voice.

"Because I had to tell *somebody*! Folks here think my dad walks on water like that guy in the Bible. Like he saved them all. But he ain't saved my mom, and he coulda. They all think I'm crazy for hatin' him so much. But fuck 'em all, and him especially. If you're in here with me, then you're not one of them. Pretty sure there's a sayin' for that."

Brin wasn't sure how it went either, but tried anyway.

"The enemy of my enemy is my friend."

"Yep. That's it."

Somewhere in the building not far away, hinges screeched as a door opened, and then closed. She looked towards the sound, and saw another white spark floating through the dark mist.

Brin didn't even hesitate. As difficult as it was to let it go, she reached through the bars and held the cube in her open hand.

"Here."

Andrew took it, and what little light it provided to the mis-wired optics in her head disappeared as he withdrew his hand. He whispered as another door opened, this one even closer, and the second even-brighter spark floated closer. She thought she knew what was coming, even as Andrew answered her.

"That's proof."

"Proof of what?"

"I can trust you. You didn't try to keep it."

Brin decided to take a risk, though it was just more acting on her part.

"Yes, but I can tell them about it. Maybe they'll let me go if I do."

Andrew sighed, and his disappointment sounded genuine.

"True enough. Didn't think about that."

She laid down the last piece.

"But I won't. Because, fuck 'em all, right?"

He laughed, and the relief in his voice convinced her.

"Yes, ma'am. And it's very nice to meet you, Brin."

