

Additional Information

The man was long gone, and the sun was well below the western horizon. It had been a spectacular slide along the color wheel from yellow to red, and then slowly into the cooler colors, all painted on the few clouds in the sky.

Nobody had an answer to Jake's question. She could only shrug at him, and Bear didn't offer anything at all. It was like the man on the horse had dropped a confusion grenade in their midst while making his dramatic exit, and the three of them were temporarily disconnected.

Jake had muttered a few phrases to himself that were varying versions of "I don't fucking get it", and she was about to reach for his hand again when he grabbed his bow and quiver and stomped off. He spoke at them over his shoulder.

"I'm going to get us dinner. Would you guys set up camp? I'll find you."

She looked at Bear, but he didn't meet her eyes. He just pulled the wheel-barrow towards the edge of the road. Her confusion only grew. She had never been abandoned by them both at the same time, unless she had been the one to walk away.

Bear seemed to realize this moments later. He stopped, and turned back to her. There was an apology in his expression, rather than his words. He pointed towards a fringe of trees bordering a low mesa.

"I think that will work. Coming?"

She nodded, and followed, though the interruption between them all still seemed to echo outward in the shape of uncertainty. The specter of the man on the horse continued to float above all of it. She felt very unsettled, though she didn't really know why.

In an attempt to recapture herself, she switched from three to two cubes. She was growing more and more unwilling to put that limit on her sight, despite what it allowed her to do. Seeing all the way had become a pervasive need, and limiting it just to find more of these stupid blocks was becoming harder and harder to make herself do.

The idea that the dark was optional now was the most difficult thing she'd had to embrace since being banished to it in the first place. Vision was now her drug, she realized. She wanted it all the time.

Yet, she looked into the semi-darkness for the sparks that would presumably build some version of a new world for them. Her struggle was the tension between want and should as she followed Bear to the place he eventually picked.

She helped set up camp and get a fire going. They had real fires now, not the tepid imitation everyone had been limited to since the power went. All it took was a single cube placed next to it, and the heat more than tripled. Cooking was no longer a long slog from room temperature to just warm enough to be palatable for the preserved stuff they carried with them. Jake hunted, and they could cook anything he brought back.

Jake had also discovered that the cubes were unaffected by heat, just last night. It had been by accident, of course. Because the burn temperature was so much higher, they hadn't had to find completely seasoned wood as fuel. It had made gathering it a lot easier, but the trade-off had been more violent fires. Sap and moisture could make for some interesting pyrotechnics.

She had been turning some small venison steaks in the skillet when one of the fire-lengths exploded, sending embers in all directions. Jake had reacted instantly, leaning forward and batting the cube away from the fire. All the embers in the air went out, and the fire diminished.

He had looked at her as he stood up.

"You ok? Any burns?"

She had shaken her head, even as Bear stood up as well.

Jake had chased the clear block to its resting place, and squatted down. He'd tapped it with his finger once, then picked it up, turning back to them.

"It's not hot. It should be hot."

He returned to the fire, and stared at it for a second. Then he tossed the cube into it.

She and Bear had both gotten truncated verbal bits of alarm out, one after the other.

"Jake!"

"What the f--?"

The fire blazed again, and the heat returned.

The little cube just sat among the coals, unaffected. The light from the flames played across all of its visible faces.

Jake said,

"See? Nothing. You said one of these hit a rock when it fell off that tower, and nothing happened to it. I'll bet you that when I pull that thing out of there, it's *still* not hot."

They both watched him do just that, using a couple of kindling sticks. Once he'd pincer'd it and set it down on the ground, he didn't even bother to tap it this time. He just picked it up, and then tossed it to Bear. Bear caught it, and to his credit, he didn't flinch or drop it. He then opened his closed hand, and the clear cube sat in his palm. Bear looked at her.

"He's right. It isn't any warmer than any of them we've found."

She'd asked the obvious question, but even as she did, it felt like she already knew the answer.

"So what does that mean?"

She had watched some of Jake's confidence ebb. He smiled at her, and his answer was meant to comfort her, she could tell. But even this new expansion of their understanding of the power blocks didn't unlock that much for the three of them. His words confirmed it.

"It means we know a little more than we did a few minutes ago. Maybe we can eventually figure this out."

The memory stepped back as she heard someone approaching through the trees. She was gratified to see that it took Bear a few more moments before he heard the same thing, and turned. At least her hearing wasn't fully diminished yet. She knew it was eventually inevitable, as her senses equalized.

Jake stepped out of the trees, carrying the fattest rabbit she'd ever seen. He looked at them, and it was apparent that he was much calmer now. He shrugged.

"It was what I could get."

They ate, and then sat around the fire. Jake picked up the block and again tossed it to Bear, who was sitting closest to the wheel-barrow. Bear slid it into his pack, which was sitting on top. They didn't need the fire for warmth at night anymore, as spring was starting to migrate towards summer, and each day of travel brought them through lower elevations.

Then Bear casually dropped a bomb into the scant conversation.

"I'm pretty sure I've seen that guy before."

She and Jake both looked over at him, dumbfounded. Several different responses got tangled up in her head trying to get out the door, so it was Jake that spoke first.

"What the hell, man? You're just telling us this now?"

Bear stared calmly back at him, and nodded.

"You were pretty worked up. I figured I'd let you settle a little, and you did."

Jake leaned forward, his anger clear. His mouth opened, but then shut. She watched, her own protestations dimming as she saw him struggle to rein himself in. It only took a second or two for him to then sit back, his eyes clearing. He regarded Bear a moment longer before he spoke again.

"Fair enough. Tell me."

Bear looked upward, and it was clear this part of memory lane was not one he wanted to walk again. But he did, facing them once more.

"Once Elise was...gone, I spent most of my time up on the ridge above Evanston. It didn't take me long to decide what I could try to do for payback.

The houses up there had been pretty well raided by then, but there was enough left for me to live on. One of them had a huge deck hanging out over the slope, and it was a good observation point. I could see the road, and all the shit the King and his gang did along it, though the binoculars I had weren't great.

I couldn't see well enough to see faces, but the color and markings on the horse were what I remember. Pretty sure it's the same dude."

She got the question out before Jake did.

"The King?"

Bear popped his thumbs up from clasped hands and pursed his lips before responding.

"That's what he called himself. 'King of the Valley'. Sounds pretty pompous, but face-to-face you could see he had the power to call himself anything he wanted, and do what he wanted. And that guy on the horse met with him at least once. They talked on the road for a bit, and then he rode away. Back this way."

Jake got it.

"That's why he didn't care what we had to say. He already knew."

She corrected him.

"He *thought* he knew."

Bear gave a low rasp of a laugh, and pointed at her, nodding.

Jake smiled too, but it was fleeting. He made his next point, and she could hear the concern in his voice.

"Yeah, yeah, the King is dead. But is the guy on the horse a messenger, or a king someplace else? He didn't look like a messenger to me."

Bear agreed.

"It didn't look like a letter delivery at the time. It *looked* like a summit, but I could be wrong."

She voiced the obvious conclusion as a question, but it was just another one she already knew the answer to. She looked at Bear.

"So, when he sees what you did, what? He's headed back this way?"

Bear spread his hands.

"He came from this direction, then and now. He left back then the same way. Is that enough data points? I don't know."

Jake sighed before speaking. He sounded tired to her, but not only that. There was a level of demoralization in his voice that she hadn't heard before. Even his edict carried no conviction.

"We should kill the fire, and watch the road. The moon's up. I'll take the first--."

Bear interrupted him, and she could tell he had heard it too.

"Nah. I got it. You fed us. Get some rest. I'll come get you later."

With that, he got up, shouldered his pack, and headed off toward the edge of the trees that offered a view of the road.

She turned to him when Bear had gone.

"You ok?"

He smiled wanly at her.

"I have moments where life spells out my insufficiency in capital letters."

She got up and crossed the small distance between them. She sat then in his lap, and wrapped her arms around his shoulders, acquiring his eyes with her own. She tried humor first.

"Self-doubt is very unattractive."

It got her nowhere. He just looked more miserable as he put his arms around her, too.

"What do we do with all this, Brin? We're carrying all this power around, but each day is some version of the same thing. What can three people do? And tomorrow, we hide it all, well, most of it anyway, and then try to connect with more people. Each day since we lost the world, it's been nothing but defense, except for you, your dad, and Bear. Why should I think tomorrow will be any different?"

She looked deep into his eyes, and it came to her in the moment that she'd seen all of Jake. All she was likely to see in this life, anyway. She understood that time could bring a greater familiarity, if they were given it, but she didn't need it. He was feeling down because he felt responsible for all of them now, not just her. She was sure he was wondering why Bear hadn't assumed that burden.

Her intuition had told her why, and she knew it was right. Bear had *been* on the hook for that before, and he'd failed. Her sense of it was that now, Bear would fight for them, but he wouldn't lead them.

She also knew that while Jake didn't want it, he wouldn't run from it. That just made her love him more. She planted a kiss on his cheek, stood, and went to the wheel-barrow, pulling their sleeping bags from under the tarp as well as grabbing a third cube. As she laid them out and zipped them together, she could feel him watching her.

She added the third cube to her saltine packet, and then shrugged out of her hoodie and sweats. She bundled the packet into the clothing and put it at the head of their bed. If she was going to do this, she wanted the full measure of all five senses. She looked at him.

"Put out the fire, and come here."

"But--."

"Don't argue. You'll just lose."

She stood there in her underwear, watching him first cover the already-anemic fire with dirt, and then make his way towards her in the flood of moonlight that took its place. She felt a sense of deep

desire, and something else she couldn't quite identify. She knelt, and slid into the sleeping bag as Jake took off his clothes and then did the same.

They faced each other, heads resting on clothing that really needed to be washed, but neither caring in the least. She thought he might try one more time to dissuade her.

He did not, and as they moved together, she let the mystery feeling slip away, un-named.