Hear Him Roar

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From the day Kyle and Jean first sprang the EnCompass on me, I had dismissed it as the latest in a long line of gadgets we could all do without, giving zero thought to the little machine as an actual asset. Since it had probably saved my life, and since I had a good deal of time on my hands, I now considered it.

The thing would obviously be useful to a person in unfamiliar surroundings, or to a chronically disoriented person who gets lost all the time even in his home town. It could also save a delivery driver or service person a lot of thumbing through old fashioned street guides. But for Charlie Sayers, who rarely strayed from his own deep and well-worn ruts, a plain old map was a perfectly satisfactory and much more economical navigation tool.

Then there was the gismo’s other feature, the signal tracking technology that enabled the Big Sky Clan Plan. In the past, I would have felt nothing but scorn for a system that allowed other clan members to monitor my location simply by punching my initials into their machines. But now, immobile and isolated, I occupied myself by checking the whereabouts of various kith and kin who’d agreed to join our clan when they bought the EnCompass from Kyle.

Just now I was monitoring June’s progress across Olives. I watched the pulsing asterisk that represented her leave Bridge Street and head out of Old Olives; watched it wait at the stop light before continuing down Sadie’s street and turning up the private drive. The trip from the parking area up to my recovery room was too short to register on the system. So I just sat and watched that pulsing asterisk, my mind totally blank when it should have been
preparing for this encounter with the person who now knocked on the actual door.

I stowed the EnCompass and called for June to come in. She sat down in the rocking chair. As she was inquiring about my recovery I watched her looking around the room, noticing things and, if my hunch was correct, digging down to the decorative stratum just below the current one.

Seeing my chance, I asked if she remembered the dark brown carpet that used to cover the floor.

Of course she remembered it, like she remembered trying to talk Edward into something else. “He wanted shag,” she said. “I never liked shag. But it did go with the wallpaper.”

I’d been worried all morning about her visit, the first time we would meet since the night I tried to mash her at the zoo. But now here we were collaborating, rebuilding Edward’s bedroom from memory. With the dark brown shag went the wallpaper with its earth colors and safari theme, lions and tigers and cheetahs (oh my), also gazelles and antelopes. Hanging by its curled tail from a hook in the ceiling, the stuffed iguana we brought him from Mexico. On the dresser (to June’s perpetual dismay) the heap of nuts and bolts and nails and tin cans and whatever else caught his eye along the roadside between here and his elementary school. His junk collection, he called it. The globe. The desk. The fishtank. The closet stuffed with...what? (Neither of us ever really knew.) The stickers plastered over every square centimeter of the doorframe. And the posters—of sports stars in the early days, then of Farrah Fawcett and other chickies, finally of long-haired guys with guitars.

This excavation warmed us up a little, loosened my tongue enough to bring up my misconduct at the zoo.

“Listen,” I said, “the other night, after the auction. The way I behaved, there’s no excuse.”

June’s eyes widened. “I was going to say sorry to you.”

“For what?”

“The way I took off, that wasn’t very nice. I knocked you out and just left you there.”
“It was probably better that way,” I said. “At least I didn’t have to face you when I came to.”

“Well, I want you to know I did come back for you, but you were already gone.” She thought a moment. “It was so strange, Charlie. I think I really scared myself. I hit you and then I was off like a shot.”

“Afraid I’d hit back?”

“Afraid of how good it felt,” she said. “Too bad I didn’t knock you out a long time ago. Might have saved the marriage.”

We laughed together.

“In a way,” June mused, “I feel like I’ve stayed married to you all this time.”

“What way?”

“Well, I haven’t remarried, that’s obvious. I’ve met a couple of really nice men, but... I don’t know. Something’s held me back.”

“What?” she said, reacting to my face. “Surprised?”

“Frankly, yeah. I thought I was the one who hadn’t moved on.”

“There are different ways of stalling,” she said.

“But you’ve worked on all this stuff.”

“I have made progress. Some.”

“But you seem so upbeat all the time.”

She nodded, and for the first time ever I saw in her face something of the old woman she would become. “Even when I’m not. That’s a problem.”

I didn’t know what to say next. Little tremors of fear started moving through my nervous system, relatives of the larger dread that invaded me when June had embraced me on the zoo bench, when I’d felt the heavy pull of her sadness.

“What’s wrong?” she said.

I shook my head. “Remember when we were standing in the yard that day, up here on the hill, looking at the storm clouds over the mountains?”

She turned to the window, which looked in that direction. “When I said it was over between us?”
“The way you said it I’ll never forget. You had such conviction. I knew it was true.”

Still she looked at the window.

“You surprised me,” I said.

“How?”

“The way you spoke the truth. The strength of that. I didn’t know you had it in you, but when I saw that I was relieved.”

“Relieved?”

“Because Edward was dead, and that just bewildered me. It was up to you to mourn him properly. I knew you would. I’m not saying that was fair,” I added.

Now she turned back toward me. “Why do you think of this now?”

“It made me nervous, you talking about your struggles. That’s a part of you I haven’t wanted to see.”

She was right not to say anything, to let this moment unfold. As we sat there quiet and still I had the sensation we were moving, as if on tiptoe, gingerly, cautiously, like travelers crossing a rope bridge that spans something deep. That lasted until she reached out and gave the bedside a light slap.

“I really like Jean,” she said in a kind of confidential voice.

“You’ve met?”

“Spoke to her some at the hospital. She’s feisty.”

“She is. But the two of us together, I don’t know…”

“Oh, I think you make a good pair.”

“Based on what?”

“A lot in common.” She looked me in the eyes, nodding. “We had a pretty long talk, Jean and I.”

“And?”

“She told me about the way Kyle’s father took off. Also how her father died. I guess you pointed out to her that those things were affecting the way she acted with you—the stomach stuff.”

“She agrees with me on that?”

“Now she does. She only wishes you could have told her in a different way.”
“What do you think?” I said.
“I suppose the important thing is that it came out, not how it came out. And what you do now.”
“Any suggestions?”
“I think you know how important this time coming up is for the two of you.” Her eyes held mine long enough to confirm that I caught her meaning.
“I would like to know one thing,” she said.
I nodded.
“Do you feel any different?”
“Different?”
“After all that’s happened.”
I reflected a minute. “I guess I do. I can’t really explain it, though.”
“I feel different,” she said as tears flashed into her eyes.
“How?”
Emotions moved across her face like strong weather. “Charlie,” she finally said, “were we ever friends?”
“Before now?” I said, taking the hand she offered.
“The other day,” I said after a minute, “getting ready for the auction. I enjoyed that, being in your kitchen.”
“I liked having you.”
“It’s your element,” I said.
She nodded.
“The lab was my element,” I told her.
“It was tough on you, losing that.”
“I’m just starting to see how tough.”
She squeezed my hand, feeling for me.
“Then again,” I said, “maybe it was for the better.”
“How?”
“Would I be here, would we be here, like this, if the lab was up and running? If I could keep my eyes glued to the microscope all day long?”
“That’s a good way to look at things, Charlie.”
“Maybe that’s what’s different,” I said.
“What?”
“My way of looking at things.”

*Even my way of looking at you,* I thought, for her beauty was no hazard to me now.