

Down By the Riverside

We left Dave's tiny haven behind, and made our way down into the wider valley below. Gravity helped for the most part, combating the additional friction between the sled runners and the trail bed in the absence of snow.

Brin was her typical silent self, and I was lost in the effort of it. I stopped at my cache spots along the way, and added to the load on the sled. I had no idea what to expect past the last one, as I'd never gone further out than that, even hunting. I guessed that we'd dropped maybe a thousand feet in elevation across eight or nine miles of deer track. It was definitely warmer, and I could see a river winding through the valley floor below as the trees began to clear.

This was still remote country, and there was no indication of developed land as far as I could see. The upland trees thinned, and then I was dragging the sled through level grass-land. I left the track, and made toward the river, which was partially obscured by a verge of tall trees and lesser brush. Once we reached it, pushing through a scrim of acacia, we ended up on a gravel beach. It stretched away along this bank to the south, ending at a stone embankment running perpendicular to the river's course, forcing it to flow to the south-east, out of sight. Behind the embankment, a hill rose, cresting quickly at a ridge that blocked the view to the south.

I halted, still in the shade of vegetation bordering the strand. I was out of breath, and drenched in sweat. I sat down on a partially buried tree trunk, and waited to recover from my efforts. Brin's voice surprised me, as she'd been silent since we'd left. It was even and quiet, as usual.

"Can I make a persistent request?"

I got there in an instant, and felt like a complete idiot.

"Yes, of course. Just a guess, but, information? I apologize. I should have."

"I can tell a lot, but...."

"I'm sorry. We're down in the lower valley, at the river."

I stopped myself, sighed, and then continued.

"Also going to guess you already knew that. What's the best thing to describe? Coach the moron."

She tilted her head, as though trying to sift through my statement.

"Just what I can't hear."

I took a second, and then tried.

"It's fairly wide here, but looks shallow. I can't tell if maybe there's a deeper section against the other bank. Comes in from the north, runs pretty much south, but turns east a hundred yards or so downstream. How am I doing so far?"

She just nodded. I continued.

"Probably a quarter mile of meadow on either side before you hit a tree line, beyond what lines the banks. There's a rock wall south of us, pushing the water east, but I can't see where it goes after that. It's got a huge pine--." She interrupted me.

"Right at the bend? On top?"

I looked at her, drawn back from my observations.

"Yes. Eighty, maybe a hundred feet high."

"Vines down below?"

“Uh, yeah. What?”

She turned to look directly through me. In that moment, it seemed to me that given all the time spent in our communal orbit around Dave, I should be used to it, that look. I realized the folly of the idea a short second later. She had almost never looked at the place where she thought I was, because she’d rarely thought me worthy of that long focus.

I was spared any deep introspection on how that made me feel, beyond a tiny blip of despair, because she responded right away, and her face was alight, and more animated than I’d ever seen it.

“He told me about this place! We can stay here!”

What followed was at once thrilling, and troubling, but it took me some time to identify what made it either thing.

She told me that Dave had hunted this valley for most of his life. It’s why he’d chosen it to build the compound up at the top.

He had described this particular place in it to Brin a number of times, in detail. She went so far as to explain that she understood why he’d not bothered to try to map the route for her.

“He knew four senses, no matter how heightened, wouldn’t get me here by myself.”

She went on to tell me about the cave entrance, hidden behind the vines below the tall pine, a crack in the stone embankment that became a wider space beyond and inside. There was even a natural chimney, a fault in the rock above that would vent smoke from a fire inside the cave to a location behind the hill above. I could hear Dave in her descriptions, and I could hear his hope in redundancy, provided she could somehow get from there to here, if there became what it had now become.

She was speaking towards me, and that held significant power over me. However, I got pretty quick that she had been handed by circumstance a conduit back to her father, or at least, the idea of his influence in her life. That was who she was really talking to. And why not? I wished he was here too. I waited until she’d finished showering me with attention meant for someone else.

She ended with a question with only one answer, because despite all the sub-text, it was late afternoon, and we needed to stop somewhere.

“What do you think?”

I mentally shrugged.

“Let’s go check it out.”