

These Walls

It was there, where she'd said it would be. The entrance was indeed hidden behind a thin drape of vines, and was high enough to require me to boost her up. It was also narrow enough to have us both turn sideways to make our way through, though it widened quickly into a chamber the size of a small apartment. The ceiling near the entrance was barely six feet high, but rose to maybe eight toward the rear of the space, with a large vertical crack at the very back apex. The stone floor was level, and there was a fire pit chipped into the rock towards the back, surrounded by flat stones. This may have been a natural formation, but it had been adapted for use by people some time ago, and looked pretty well travelled. I felt a distinct unease at this, but I kept it to myself for the time being.

An odd trick of optics or alignment brought light reflected off of the water outside deeper into the space than seemed possible, so the entrance glowed, and cast enough illumination to see the entire interior quite well.

Brin, once inside, seemed to move with more confidence. It was hard to tell if it was her personal radar, or her comfort at being once again in a place her father had occupied. I watched her explore the space, and decided there was a fair amount of stuff left to do if we were going to stay here. I was hungry, and guessed she probably was too.

"You good? I should unload some stuff, and stash the sled. Need to get some firewood, too."

Her reply was absent.

"Yeah, good."

I did all those things, and by the time I carried the last load of driftwood and downed branches into the chamber, the sun was starting to set. Brin was sitting to one side of the fire pit, back against the wall, cushioned by her sleeping bag I'd brought in earlier. The reflected light from outside was dwindling, and I knew I'd need to hustle to get a fire going to replace it. I set about the task, and became lost in memory as I did.

Like so many other skills, Dave had taught me how to light a fire. Matches and lighters were inert now, like so many other things. Friction was the only way to start a fire anymore. The first time he'd shown me, he'd had this conspiratorial tone, as if sharing a secret nobody else could possibly know. It was more likely he didn't know what to do with the contradiction himself. He'd prefaced the demonstration with,

"This shouldn't work, you know."

"What do you mean?"

"I'll show you."

He then did the thing we've all seen on TV and in movies involving vigorously rubbing two dry sticks together until there's smoke at the contact point. He stopped and pulled them slightly apart.

"Touch that."

"Uh, no thanks."

He sighed.

"Jake, if I wanted to hurt you, I could, and would. Just trust me?"

I looked at him. He nodded, and then repeated the show until smoke curled into the air again.

He pulled the sticks apart, and I reached down and touched the contact point.

It was hot, and I yanked my hand back in reflex, but it wasn't *that* hot. The tip of my finger was barely red, and the pain passed quickly. He looked at me.

"There you go. You get it, right? This is stupid. Do you know the ignition temperature of wood?" I shook my head, but then something occurred to me.

"Wait. *Fahrenheit 451*. Ray Bradbury."

He tilted his head in a "I'll meet you where you are" gesture.

"That's paper, and it's a range, not a magic number. Wood is higher --."

He stopped himself, and shook his head.

"The point is, this is not that. I do this same thing, and drop some dried leaves in there, and bingo."

He did just that while I watched again.

You remember early on when I talked about eventually meeting people who had time to think about the death of power in the world, and come to conclusions about it? Dave was the first, and this was the first time he'd spoken to me about it, as we watched his tiny fire blossom and grow.

"This is a loop-hole, Jake."

"Uh...."

He looked up at me, and it was clear that he knew he'd lost me. This seemed to frustrate him.

"What happened? This isn't thermodynamics anymore, it's just a parlor trick. You haven't even thought about it?"

I bristled inwardly at his tone, but dialed my response as far back toward mild sarcasm as I could.

"I've thought about it every time I lit a fire."

He snorted, and his eyes lit up a little.

"So, no thoughts so far about this bit. Ok, how about the rest of it?"

It irritated me how he came across as a know-it-all, but the reality was I really hadn't. I hadn't cared. I was busy trying to live. But that didn't seem to work as an excuse. Whatever. I was not going to rise to it. Screw him.

Petulant, I know. You weren't there, reader.

"I am an empty vessel. Fill me, oh Dave, and we shall travel together in your wisdom."

He stared at me for a few seconds, and then burst into laughter. He turned away from the fledgling fire in front of us, and was lost in it for moments longer, until it degenerated into coughing that then became the worst version of itself. I felt awful, and could only feed the fire as he slowly regained himself. There was silence for a bit, punctuated only by the snap and crack of the growing flames.

"Well, at least you're good for a laugh."

More silence as his breathing steadied, and then he continued.

"This is important. Something slapped us so hard we've gone back in time. You're not interested? No ideas?"

He looked at me, obviously expecting me to answer.

"No clue. Sorry."

He looked disappointed, and slightly annoyed. This makes sense in retrospect, given the plans he had for me. I'm sure he'd hoped for a smarter candidate. In an uncharacteristic move, I chose to feel nothing, and let his expectation just slide off of me. I looked back at him, waiting.

He seemed to adjust something within and let it go.

“Ok. But I hope you *will* think about it.”

I came back to the present. The fire in front of me was the only illumination left, as the sun had obviously set outside. Brin hadn’t moved, and seemed lost in thought. I briefly toyed with the idea of asking her how she was, but rejected it, as she rarely responded well to a conversational gambit from me. Instead, I pulled a metal grill from my bag, and set it across the fire, bridging two of the ring stones. I laid a skillet atop it, and then food into it. It was rote, adapted to new surroundings and constraints.

The smoke from the fire found its unerring way to the ceiling, and then the vent at the rear, disappearing into it as though pulled into a vacuum. I had to admire the usefulness of it. It was a good place, in a rarely-traveled region.

My problem continued to be that there were people out there who knew about it. I couldn’t know how many there were left, and of those, how many could travel this far now. It was a rapidly narrowing number set, probably diminishing exponentially by the day.

Yet, the idea carried no comfort. All it would take would be one party with superior numbers, or a lapse in awareness or judgment by me. Again.

Brin broke the silence.

“You don’t think we can stay here.”

“Do you?”

“Tell me why not.”

I sighed, thinking that I shouldn’t have to. We hadn’t spoken much, but I knew she was smart. Why would she ask me to explain something she already knew? I stirred the contents of the skillet in a fruitless delay for time to calm my irritation.

“Your dad told me he built your place pretty much by himself, right?”

She nodded.

“He didn’t build this.”

“So?”

What did she mean, “So?”?

“C’mon. You’re his daughter. You already know the answer. There’s no good reason for me to spell it out.”

Her expression hardened, and I could see I’d chosen poorly.

“What do *you* know about what I know? What do you know about anything? You’re alive right now because he *taught* you how to be alive. I didn’t ask for your help! I told you to leave, remember? You want to go? Go!”

Her anger was apparent and all up front, but I could hear fear hidden behind it, too.

“I’m not going anywhere. I’m just talking. We’re just talking.”

Now the anger really hit. Her eyes glittered with it.

“Wow. Now you’re trying to *handle* me? One more time for the boy who would be Dave. You’re not my father! I don’t *need* you!”

“I’m sorry. That was a stupid thing for me to say.”

I could see her wrestle with it, and it appeared to be an epic battle as it played across her face. In the end, she just moved on.

“It smells like it’s ready.”

