

Rubicon

I awoke to the smell of breakfast. As I came awake, there was this moment that did not include the event prior to my falling asleep, and for the time between it and remembering, I felt ok.

Then, I got the download, and wished I'd not woken up. I briefly considered the possibility of falling back asleep, but could tell it wasn't going to happen, so I sat up, rubbing the sleep out of my eyes.

Brin was pushing some semi-identifiable bits around in a pan above the fire. I could tell she registered my return to the world of the conscious by the tilt of her head, but she didn't say anything. Silence reigned as I completed my journey back to a world I really wished I didn't have to return to.

Let's be honest here, reader. I have been, as much as I can. I told you about my subtractions from the dwindling pool of humanity. I've tried to give it to you in context. Many men, a few women.

But now, a kid.

Not a clinical, distance subtraction, where my intent happened far enough from me to allow me to at least partially unplug myself from it, even when I had to attend to the aftermath.

I just re-read the last few paragraphs. I really wish I had an eraser. If I'm going to be "honest", yet "partially" let myself off the hook, I should just stop writing this down. The lies we tell ourselves, right?

The halo of blood. That's all I could see. Now, I felt sick, and the smell of food made me feel worse.

I sat up. The fire, as well as light from outside was more than enough to illuminate the darkened spatters of blood on the cave walls, the pool of it on the floor, and long smears in the drag marks leading to the entrance. My shoulder throbbed with cyclical intensity, and I could feel something spiraling upward inside me once again. I knew that when it reached my throat, I couldn't be anywhere near Brin.

"I've got to go wash up. I'll be back." My words were small, and out of breath.

I thought she might reply, but she didn't, just nodded her head without turning. I got to my feet, and nearly rushed out of the cave. I dropped off the lip of the entrance after sitting down on it, and as soon as I landed on the gravel of the beach, I started shedding my clothes. I cast them aside as I walked towards the water, and waded into it naked. There wasn't a lot of thought, I just did it. I registered the bodies lying nearby, but refused to contemplate them. That part was done.

I struggled through the current, and fought the uneven footing as the water deepened. It was very cold. There actually was a deeper section near the opposite bank, and when I finally reached it, I dove in and submerged.

I let the current carry me along for maybe half a minute, and then started to swim upwards, and towards the other bank. I broke the surface, and crossed most of the last few feet of open water between me and the wall of trees and overgrowth lining the shore as it scrolled by. I turned to face downstream, and saw a fallen branch jutting out into the river, most of it below the water-line. As I drifted past, I reached out with my good arm and hooked it around the narrow trunk. My body aligned with the current flowing past, and then the water dragged at me, trying to tug me free.

I wrapped my other arm around it, and entwined my fingers. My shoulder began to shriek with pain under the stress, but I didn't let go.

I just took a deep breath, and that thing within me finally made its way out.

I buried my face in the water and screamed.

I repeated this, until they weren't screams anymore, just hoarse exhalations into the water rushing past, carrying them away.

I couldn't tell you how long that took. It probably wasn't as long as it felt. I did come back to myself, and the pain in my shoulder and my throat told me it was time to go. I released the branch, and struck for the other shore. I was coming up on another bend in the river, and needed to push hard to cross the deep section before being swept out into the larger pool there.

I barely made it. My feet finally found purchase in the shallows, numb as they were, and I lurched upwards, fighting the current once more. It was even harder now, given the lack of feeling in my extremities. I must have looked ridiculous, wading back to the shore. Not that I was in any shape to care.

Numb. That's a good word. I'd leached the heat out of my body, and screamed out my internal conflict. Even the pain in my shoulder was muted now.

But it would all return. I knew it. As I staggered back onto the gravel of the beach on feet that were sustaining minor damage I couldn't even feel in the moment, I knew I could not escape this. It was an analgesic that would wear off, and I'd have to face it all again. I stopped, and turned back towards the river.

I could go back in. Let it take me. Don't fight it. Explore the black depths.

I wavered.

I'd like to say it was the thought of Brin's face that brought me back, but no, even that commitment was up for grabs right then.

It was Dave.

Let's go, kid. This isn't the Odyssey.

I turned away and headed back to the cave. By the time I'd returned to the cave entrance, my feet hurt nearly as much as my shoulder. I dressed, and then took a moment to look at the five forms littered across the beach, focusing on the smallest just as the sun broke across the top of the mountains to the east, flooding the valley with light.

I could feel it all hurtling toward me again as I regarded his small body lying there, next to the remains of someone who was tasked with keeping him safe. The bow-wave of it broke against another bit of Dave.

I don't need your apologies. I need your help.

I turned away, and went to the cave entrance, hoisting myself up, and went back in.

Brin turned her head to acknowledge me. She was eating, but a plate sat waiting for me. I went to it, picked it up, and then sat down opposite her.

"That took a while."

"Yeah, sorry. A little house-keeping."

She frowned.

"You sound terrible. Are you sick?"

I spooned in some food, to get a chance to come up with a response. I finished swallowing.

"Water down the wrong pipe. That right amount that gets you going for a while."

What appeared to be disbelief showed up in her expression, but she didn't pursue it.

We ate in silence for a bit. She finished, and put her plate aside.

"I have an idea."

"Good, because I don't. Tell me."

"My dad knew someone who might help us."

"Sounds like there's a 'but' in there, somewhere."

She smiled, but it was pale and half-hearted.

"He's a long way from here."

"Of course he is."

"I have no idea if he survived all this."

"You're not really selling this idea, you know."

This time, her smile was solid.

"He taught my dad how to hunt."

That landed.

"How far?"