

Outro

Brin (6 years later)

She watched Little Dave (they all called him that, though his name was David) climb up to the top of the mound the bones of his grandfather lay beneath. Jake had buried her father up here at the highest point in the compound all those years ago, and every time she visited the cairn, she wondered at the vagaries of life. Violet, named after Jake's mother, slept against her chest in the baby carrier that Bear had made for her.

It was a beautiful spring day, and the green that surrounded her was a sight to behold.

She contemplated that phrase, and reveled once more in the fact that it still applied to her thanks to the three connected cubes in her pocket. After dwelling in darkness for so many years, she'd never take it for granted again. She *knew* she wouldn't, in the same way she wouldn't think any good thing she'd been given was her due.

"Little Dave, no falling."

He smiled, and then promptly leaped off of the top of the mound. Her heart hitched a bit and she moved forward, too late.

But he hit the slope lower down in a tuck-and-roll, and came back to his feet, still with a grin on his face and arms extended in victory. Everything about his stance said, "Tada!"

She just sighed.

"Fine. Do your thing. Don't come crying to me if you break something."

She returned to her contemplations as Little Dave ascended the mound once more.

When she was here, she did occasionally think about her grandfather. It was easy to think about lineage in the presence of her father's remains. Thinking about him took her back.

Their departure from Garnet had been pretty much a non-event. A few arrows smacking against the reinforced glass or armored shell were it. It was as if they'd taken the head off the snake, and somehow the snake knew it without knowing it right then. The body had thrashed about a bit, but they left it behind before seeing the end of its gyrations.

Her grandfather had been nowhere to be seen, and she wondered if that was by his design, or Dale's. It was just a curiosity though, not anything that really mattered.

They'd recovered their bag of cubes on the way, and then had returned to retake her father's compound at the top of Three Stones Valley with almost no effort. It was in terrible shape, and anything of worth had been looted. Two squatters put up nothing close to a fight, but had paid the price all the same. That was the world now. A machete meant nothing against an M-4 and a cube.

The first year had been rebuilding, and accumulating more cubes. Their current inventory then had been 97. Then, at the end, there was her first pregnancy.

The second was more rebuilding while she threw up constantly for a few months, then stabilized, then began to waddle more than walk with her hands on her hips. And then Little Dave arrived about two-thirds through it. She'd often thought to be embarrassed that Bear knew quite well what she looked like down there now, but it seemed there wasn't anything he couldn't do, midwifery included.

Three to six were more build-out, and a re-engagement with the world at large. That is, at least from a regional perspective. There were three towns ranging from thirty to sixty miles away in different directions. Each of them had become a new version of trading posts. Lincoln was the closest, but Park Flat and Ironshot were less than a day trip in the Humvee, though diesel was becoming harder and harder to find. The horses in the upper pasture were becoming more and more relevant. Then Violet arrived, and she had decided to leave logistics to the man she loved. Not that she wouldn't have an opinion, mind you.

The cubes were the most valuable commodity, and in that sense they were probably the richest people around. They did not advertise that fact, of course. Jake, Bear, and Andrew alternated destinations and two-person combinations to trade cubes for the things they needed. A single cube could buy a wealth of resources. Every transaction carried a bit of risk, but the rules in place at the trading posts carried weight. Those that broke them paid either with permanent exile or their lives, depending on the severity of the infraction, and the punitive mind-set of those they'd tried to screw over. It was a lot like the wild west had been, she imagined.

Her new family had navigated it with little problem, and they wanted for nothing.

Andrew had met a girl in Lincoln, and Brin wondered whether they'd have another resident, or lose one. Time would tell.

As Little Dave took another swan dive off of the top of the mound, she whispered what she always did when she came here.

"Thanks, Dad."